

Written by
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FEVERED KISS

キスの温度

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Yaoi Novel

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*"If he had a girlfriend, I'm sure he wouldn't kiss me."
Satori shook his head as he slid over in the seat.*

Asou sat down next to him comfortably. Satori could only stare at him. He couldn't read the man's expression just by looking at that fine profile. "Why does he kiss me?"

Satori Okada has always been such a straight-laced guy. Always goes to his college classes, does his work well in advance. He's never stuck out much, and he's certainly never been the kind of guy to catch a girl's eye, unlike his beautiful and charming classmate Naotaka Asou. All Satori has going for him is his cool and collected logic, and maybe his 'bedroom eyes' that his friends tease him about. But little does Satori know that he has caught someone's eye. Namely, his classmate Asou's.

After an end-of-the-year party with their fellow classmates, Satori invites Asou to his place for a few more drinks. It was supposed to be a nice, friendly night of bonding and talk. But when Asou has too much to drink, Satori suddenly finds himself in a strange situation; in bed with Asou! But he just can't seem to want to push Asou away. The pleasure overwhelms him and he doesn't want Asou to stop.

Afterwards, Satori tries to write it off as too much drink, but as time goes by after the incident, Asou spends more time with Satori, and comes to his house to kiss him, just kiss him, but they are the most passionate and fevered kisses Satori has ever experienced, and they slowly start to drive him crazy for Asou. Why is Asou kissing Satori? What are his intentions? Why won't he go any further? And what's Satori going to do when he sees his Asou with an adorable young woman from another college? Will these two confused lovers ever manage to talk to each other and figure out what they truly want?

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Los Angeles

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FEVERED KISS

Fevered Kiss

“Oomph!”

At the low groan, Satori Okada lifted his face, dragging his gaze from his notes. Naotaka Asou sat in front of him, eyes closed and eyebrows drawn together.

The alarm clock on the large bed that took up half the room, read “10:00 pm.” While the *kotatsu* at their feet felt good, it was too early to be tired.

“What’s up?” Satori asked.

Asou groaned again. “I had no idea Basic Sociology was so hard.” Asou’s voice was monotone, but Satori could detect an undercurrent of worry in his words.

“You’d know that if you actually went to class. It’s your fault for skipping.”

“You’re a cold bastard, Satori.”

“What are you talking about? I told you what’s gonna be on the test,” he said, the pitch of his voice deliberately cold.

Asou opened his eyes slowly and looked up at Satori from beneath his lashes. His almond-colored eyes were breathtakingly sharp. But it wasn’t just his eyes; his whole face was angular—from his fine nose to the strong line of his mouth. It was the kind of face that bewitched everyone who saw it. His expressions rarely betrayed any real emotion, making him seem like a finely carved statue.

Even among all the different people at college, Asou stood out. It wasn’t just his looks—his fine features or his height—it was that no one else had the same kind of presence. He was the complete opposite of Satori, whose only remarkable feature was his heavy-lidded eyes, which gave him a languid air.

“Did you memorize it yet?”

Asou nodded. "I've memorized most of the stuff you said is going to be on the test."

"Okay, what's a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'?"

"That's Robert King Merton's proposition. It says when people react to a situation they perceive in a certain way, they cause that situation to happen, even if it wouldn't have happened otherwise." Asou spit his answer out in one breath, and then groaned again. "I'm just memorizing it the way it's written in your notes," he muttered, his fine eyebrows drawing together. As he almost never showed any emotion, even the slightest change in expression rendered his face that much more charming.

Satori didn't look straight at Asou; he just let his gaze fall to his paper and said, "Well, while you were spacing out, I was studying for exams. I told you to study, but you didn't listen to me."

"That's because you're the kind of kid who finishes all his summer homework in July, Satori. I knew I could count on you."

Satori could feel Asou's eyes on him, but he just shrugged without lifting his eyes from the paper.

"Guessed right, huh? Meanwhile, I had a blast because I got to play as much as I wanted all August. There's always a kid like you. Completely different from me. I spaced out the whole time, and before I knew it, it was August thirty-first." Asou heaved a sigh and flopped down on the floor.

"Hey, don't go to sleep!"

"I'm not. I'm taking a break."

Asou waved a hand at him, and Satori chuckled, laying down his pencil. They'd opened their notebooks at eight that evening, which meant they'd been working for around two hours, so it was about time they took a break.

"You want some coffee?"

"Yeah. And one of the sandwiches we bought, too."

But Asou made no move to get up and get himself one of the sandwiches. He seemed loath to leave the warmth of the *kotatsu*.

"Who do you think you are? You don't treat people very well,

you know." Yet, for all his complaints, Satori found himself standing up.

The cold air crept over his feet. His apartment building only allowed electric heaters. Anything like a kerosene heater was against the rules. But it was much better now than when he was alone. With the heat from two bodies, the small room was quite warm. Ever since *that* night, Asou had been coming every day.

In the kitchen, Satori took out two mugs, and shook his head. He didn't really care; he just didn't understand what Asou was thinking. Why would he come every single day after something like *that*? Especially when he didn't even *try* anything.

"Satori."

The voice washed over Satori, closer than he'd expected; it jerked him out of his thoughts. Satori couldn't have said when Asou came in, but when he turned around, Asou was standing right behind him.

"What?" he asked.

Asou cupped Satori's chin in his hand. His expression hadn't changed, but there was a feverish heat hidden in the depths of his dark eyes.

Here we go, Satori thought.

Those long fingers tilted his chin up, and that fine face drew closer without hesitation. Satori was enveloped by the heady scent of cologne that Asou always wore and then their mouths touched. Asou's lips were chapped.

Satori had kept his eyes open, but he closed them now. As if that were the signal he was waiting for, Asou deepened the kiss. The wet sensation of the other man's tongue opening his mouth and slipping inside made Satori's eyebrows draw together.

It wasn't like he'd never kissed anyone before. He'd kissed his girlfriend in their senior year of high school. But those kisses had been the merest press of lips. Compared to the way Asou was kissing him now, those kisses had been child's play. Besides, he and his girlfriend drifted apart for no real reason, breaking up after only half a year.

Which meant the only person Satori had ever really kissed properly was Asou. So Satori couldn't say if Asou was a good or bad kisser; all he knew was that being kissed by Asou left him in a trance.

Asou kissed like he was trying to steal Satori's soul, and Satori couldn't help responding to that, even when he didn't mean to. He couldn't think of anything else.

"Mmm..."

The violence of the kiss moved him backward, and that was when the warmth entwining with his tongue pulled back. Asou always stopped kissing him right before his body caught fire with real passion.

Here we go again, Satori thought a second time. *Why does he do that?*

He opened his eyes to see Asou smiling at him. The smile revealed his laugh lines and made him look positively boyish. Most of his college friends had probably never seen Asou's charming smile—that was how rarely the man let his calm expression falter.

"Be sure to give me lots of sugar and milk," Asou said, opening the refrigerator as though nothing had happened.

He took out the sandwiches he'd bought on his way to Satori's. He'd even bought tuna—Satori's favorite. Once, when they were talking, Satori had mentioned that tuna was his favorite kind of sandwich, and Asou remembered that.

"It sure is cold today," Asou said and then returned to the *kotatsu*.

Blinking, Satori watched him, feeling completely taken aback. He could still feel the kiss like a hot stain on his lips. He couldn't get his cool composure back as easily as Asou could.

This had been going on for a month now. Asou would come to his apartment every day. And every day, he would kiss Satori at least once. Some days, he kissed Satori as many as two, three, or even four times. But he never tried anything further than that.

What the hell is Asou thinking?

Satori could only shake his head at Asou, who was picking up his notes, his beautiful face expressionless once more.

Asou and he were never more than friends. They'd met their sophomore year of college, attending a lecture for Information Processing, which was one of the electives for students majoring in Sociology. They'd become friends quickly enough, but only close enough to chat when they happened to meet; they didn't hang out together.

The Information Processing students who'd become friendly with one another had decided to hold an early end-of-the-year party. The class was smaller than most, so they'd had the opportunity to become unusually close. The party had included Satori and Asou, along with six other guys, and two girls who brought along four girls from a different college.

Satori thought they all had a pretty good time. Aside from the annoying fact that two of the girls from the other college spent the whole time talking to Asou, the conversation had been lively, and they'd all gone to karaoke afterward.

They'd finished singing around midnight, and the two girls had tried to wheedle Asou into taking them home, but he'd practically shoved them in a taxi. Then, finally, the party had calmed down a little.

Satori remembered how angry the girls had been. "Don't those girls know how to have fun in a group? We won't invite them again."

The girls who had invited them even apologized to Asou: "We're really sorry. We didn't think they'd be like that."

"That's okay," Asou had said, laughing a little.

They'd been flirting with him outrageously, but Asou hadn't gone for it. He wasn't interested. It was that kind of stoicism that

made it hard for other men to hate him.

"We should all go drinking again some time," Asou said placidly.

The friends agreed that they would see each other again, and then headed off to their homes. Asou was the only one who was going in the same direction as Satori.

"You live over this way?" Satori had been surprised to hear that Asou lived not far from his own apartment.

"Yeah. You, too, Okada?"

On the surface, Asou seemed expressionless and unapproachable, but he was calm and quiet and easy to talk to, and Satori had always liked him. Even so, they'd never been close enough to talk about their private lives.

"You should come back to my place for a drink then," Satori decided.

There hadn't been any motive behind the invitation. He'd just felt bad that Asou had spent his time being nice to those girls. Watching that, Satori decided he'd think twice about wanting to be so popular. Men like that were so busy they didn't even have time to get drunk. He'd been intrigued by how nothing the girls had said impressed Asou.

"That okay?" Asou asked.

"Sure. We don't have school tomorrow," Satori answered.

"Then let's drink."

They had bought some beer and went back to Satori's apartment. They got under the *kotatsu* and began their own drinking party. At first, they just chatted about inane things, but when he'd begun to feel the effects of the alcohol, Satori had said honestly, "You're amazing. Those two girls were cute, but you didn't do anything."

Asou took a sip of beer and shrugged. "I would've, but they weren't my type."

"What's your type?"

"She doesn't exist."

That response had piqued Satori's interest. "Oh, really?" Drunk as he was, he felt bizarrely moved by the idea. "Well, that's a problem. If she doesn't exist, then what're you gonna do?"

Satori was pretty wasted by then. He gazed at Asou intensely.

Asou stood up quickly, and before Satori knew what was happening, he was kissed. At first, Asou's lips were hesitant, but when Satori didn't fight it, the kiss grew deep and passionate.

All Satori could think was, *Asou may be a man, but his lips are as soft as a woman's...*

When Asou had lifted Satori up and carried him to bed, Satori thought, *he may be tall, but it can't be easy to lift a 5' 5" man like me...*

When Asou had pushed up Satori's shirt and begun to caress his chest and stomach, all he thought was, *he has really cold hands...*

When the tight, lithe body pressed against his, he had thought, *he must work out.*

And even when Asou was pushing inside him, Satori only thought, *well, it's not like I'm gonna get pregnant...*

His thoughts were like that the whole time. Never once did he feel disgusted. No matter how drunk he was, he was having sex with a man. It obviously wasn't normal, but...

When he had woken up around noon, Asou was asleep beside him, naked. Satori was sober by this time, and also completely flabbergasted. After all, he'd never even slept with a woman before.

He remembered everything clearly. Including the noises he'd made because everything Asou had done to him had felt so good. Even if he hadn't remembered, the pleasure and pain of the night before lingered in his body; looking down, he saw red marks sprinkled here and there. It was obvious what they'd done. But he didn't feel disgusted by it. He didn't feel nauseated, and he didn't get goose bumps thinking about it.

What was that all about? It must have been the booze.

As he stared up at the ceiling, at a loss, Asou opened his eyes and smiled, almost shyly. "Good morning," he said.

Satori had never seen this bashful smile of Asou's before. He couldn't look away. "Morning," he answered.

"About last night..." Asou began.

Satori replied automatically, "It's okay. It's not like I'll get pregnant."

As soon as he said it, Satori had thought sarcastically to himself, *that's really not the issue, is it?*

"So it doesn't matter what you do, since you can't get pregnant?" Asou peered at him, looking slightly taken aback.

Unable to hold Asou's gaze, Satori said the first thing that came to mind: "I meant, we were wasted, but no harm done. Sometimes things happen when you get drunk."

Not that being drunk could excuse sleeping with another guy, Satori thought to himself. And it's not just wrong for Asou; what about me? Not to protest at all...to just let him do whatever he wanted, no matter how drunk I was...

Asou seemed dumbfounded, but finally he smiled. "I didn't sleep with you just because."

The words pierced right into Satori's heart. But he didn't try to understand the reason for the pain.

I can't believe I slept with another guy. Not only am I not grossed out by, but it felt good. It's so ridiculous.

Satori remembered thinking that in the back of his mind.

Asou probably just said that so I wouldn't feel bad.

"Don't worry about hurting my feelings." Satori laughed and got out of bed. "It didn't hurt that bad."

"Yeah." Asou nodded as Satori stood up slowly. He could feel Asou's eyes on his back, but he didn't turn around.

After that night, Asou came to Satori's apartment every day. Usually, he treated Satori like a friend, just the same as before. He didn't try to hit on Satori, and he never mentioned what had



happened. He didn't try to get back in Satori's bed.

But he always kissed Satori.

Satori couldn't figure out what it meant. If Asou just wanted to make out, it didn't have to be with him. There must be hundreds of girls who were dying to kiss him. The fact that he preferred Satori meant that Asou was serious when he said he didn't sleep with Satori "just because." But Satori couldn't believe it.

Asou hadn't tried to touch him since then. Asou kissed him, but even with that, Asou would just cup Satori's chin, or put a hand on the back of his neck. He would never let their bodies touch.

The more time Satori spent with Asou, the more he came to realize that the man's lack of expression was more a habit than anything else. Like his voice and attitude, his personality was calm and quiet. Except for the kissing, of course. Still, Satori could be with Asou for twenty-four hours and not get sick of him.

Satori had no clue what Asou thought about the kissing. He knew he should just ask Asou about it, and often, he tried to bring it up, but then Asou would kiss him, and Satori would decide that maybe things were fine just the way they were. That was how good it felt when Asou kissed him.

Could that mean...no, it must mean...that there is something wrong with me?

Lately, Satori was starting to wonder about his sanity. If he really didn't like it, he could push Asou away, or refuse to let the man come into his apartment. He knew that. But he couldn't resist those kisses.

There was a week left until exams, and the school was livelier than ever. The typically empty lecture hall was full today. All over the room, people were exchanging notes, and the combined noise was deafening. Installed in a seat by the window, Satori found

himself strangely interested in it all.

Who knew so many people were taking this class?

Satori didn't skip school. He felt like it was a waste of money to skip classes when he was paying so much for them. Satori was a pragmatist. Ever since elementary school, people had said that he wasn't the type to make decisions based on emotion, and he'd always agreed with them.

Before, he would have asked Asou immediately why the man had kissed him, and he would have kept pressing until he found out what Asou was thinking.

Unconsciously, he stroked his lips with a finger.

I guess those kisses are just that good. Or maybe I just like kissing? But that would make me a pervert, right?

"Okada-kun."

Satori quickly took his finger from his lips. Two girls sitting in the seats in front of him were looking his way. Both girls had their hair dyed the same shade of brown, although he didn't think they had done so on purpose. They were also carrying the same brand of purse. Eventually, Satori remembered that he'd had a class with them his freshman year. But he'd never spoken to them before.

"What?"

"Asou-kun's not with you today?"

The pointed question made Satori blink. "Why do you ask?"

"You're always together."

Come to think of it, that was true. Lately, they'd been hanging out together even at school. But of course, Asou didn't kiss him at school.

"I bet he'll be here soon," Satori answered with a smile. But inwardly, he felt strangely cold and bewildered. This wasn't the first time someone he'd never spoken to before had asked him about Asou. He'd even been ambushed at the school gates by girls from other colleges, who would ask him all kinds of questions about Asou. It must be hard being Asou, having to deal with people he'd never even seen before.

Satori watched as the girls whispered to each other, their brown heads bent together. Eventually, one of the girls raised her head, a decided look on her face. "Hey, is it true that Asou-kun has a girlfriend?"

"A girlfriend?" Satori frowned.

"Everyone's talking about it. They say she's really pretty."

"But no one knows who she is."

"And no one's ever seen her."

"We thought maybe you'd know."

"Has Asou-kun told you anything about her?"

"Hold on there." Satori put his hands up at the barrage of questions.

Asou's girlfriend? If he has a girlfriend, why is he kissing me?

"I don't know anything about it." Satori shook his head.

The two girls looked at each other, and their shoulders fell.

"Maybe it's just a rumor, after all..."

"But it'd be weird if Asou-kun didn't have a girlfriend, ya know?"

"So it is true?"

"I dunno. But I wonder what kind of girl Asou-kun would date?"

The two were completely ignoring Satori, wrapped up in their own conversation. Satori stood there, twisting his mouth up into something like a smile.

The girls do have a point. Asou is popular enough to have girls from other colleges after him. It would be weird for him not to have a girlfriend.

To put it bluntly, Asou had girls falling all over him.

But if he does, why is he kissing me? If he just wants to make out, he could make out with his girlfriend.

"What's up? You look perplexed."

Satori looked up at the warm feeling of a hand clapped on top of his head. He could feel everyone's eyes turn toward him.

"Asou."

Asou's eyes were soft. "You spacing out?"

"No, I'm okay."

The two girls from earlier now quietly faced forward. They may have been able to ask Satori questions, but they didn't have the courage to ask Asou himself.

Asou wasn't wearing anything special, just a grey leather jacket and jeans—but there was something overbearing about him, something unapproachable. That was just part of Asou's charm.

Satori didn't have half the presence that Asou did. On top of his looks, Asou was always calm and peaceful; Satori had never heard Asou raise his voice. It really would be strange for a guy so handsome and self-assured not to have a girlfriend.

Why didn't I realize something as simple as that?

"What? Do I have something on my face?" Asou shook his head.

Satori realized he'd been staring at Asou and quickly looked away. "It's nothing."

"Well, okay then. Hey Satori, push in. I can't stand here forever." Asou gestured with a nod of his head. Even at times as open and innocent as this, he wouldn't touch Satori. Asou would only touch him from the neck up.

If he had a girlfriend, I'm sure he wouldn't kiss me.

Satori shook his head as he slid over in the seat. Asou sat down next to him comfortably. Satori could only stare at him. He couldn't read the man's expression just by looking at that fine profile.

Why does he kiss me?

"Satori?" Asou asked.

And Satori answered automatically: "Yes, sir?"

Asou had started calling him by his first name after that night. *Could there be a deeper meaning to such informality?*

"What d'you mean, 'yes sir'? What is it? Is there really something on my face?"

Satori shook his head and sighed so softly, that Asou couldn't

hear him. *It may be a mystery what Asou's thinking, but at this point, I'm not even sure what kind of person I am anymore.*

Judging by the first time they'd ever talked, he'd never imagined things would turn out like this.

It had been in April, at the beginning of their sophomore year.

"Okada."

Satori turned at the sound of the deep, unfamiliar voice. He'd seen that slowly approaching figure before; that tall, slender frame, and sharp, finely featured face. The man had been famous since freshman year for his model-like looks. So Satori already knew that his name was Naotaka Asou.

Asou was heading straight toward him, but Satori didn't answer. He figured he must have heard wrong. *It's not like I'm particularly striking; there's no way he knows my name,* he thought.

As he stood there, still looking over his shoulder, Asou came to a stop right in front of him. Satori looked around. It was lunch time, and barely anyone was in the hall that led to the classrooms. Realizing that Asou must have been calling *him*, Satori looked up at the man.

Asou looked straight down at him and said, "You've got Information Processing with Professor Baba next, right?"

"Yeah." Nodding, Satori found himself captivated by Asou. Even close up, his face was shockingly beautiful. He didn't think he'd seen such a handsome face before. It was strangely moving.

I can't even believe he's human. What a gorgeous face.

Satori gazed at those sharp eyes as if Asou were a piece of fine art.

Eventually, Asou let out a soft, bitter laugh. "There something

on my face?" he asked calmly.

Satori hurriedly tore his eyes away. He felt himself blush at his own rude behavior. "There's nothing. Sorry," he said, head bent. Even staring at the floor, he could *feel* Asou smile.

"I've got Information Processing with Professor Baba next, too."

"Oh yeah?" Satori said, although he already knew that Asou was in the class. The man always stood out.

"Okada, have you started the report the teacher was talking about last week?" Asou asked as they began to walk side by side.

Satori nodded. "Yeah. I just need to print it out."

"Wow, you're already that far along?"

"It's due in April, right? I figured I should get it done. How about you, Asou?" he asked casually.

Asou's eyes widened slightly. Under the strength of such a gaze, Satori lowered his head. That fine, almost expressionless face had a strange power to it.

"What? Is there something on *my* face?" Satori joked.

"No." Asou shook his head and looked away. "You know my name," he said in his low voice.

Satori smiled. "I'd have to be living under a rock not to know your name."

It wasn't an exaggeration, just the truth. There was no one at that college, or even the surrounding colleges, who didn't know Asou's name.

Of course I know Asou's name, but how does he know mine? Satori wondered, as he and Asou entered the classroom together, where they were greeted by wild looks from everyone in the room.

"Asou, Okada—you two know each other?" Daichi Fujisaki asked from his seat by the window, his big eyes even wider than usual. Satori had become friends with him during their Linguistics class freshman year. Next to Daichi sat Yousuke Nakamoto, who had also been in Linguistics with them.

"No, we don't really know each other," Satori replied.

Daichi hummed. He wasn't the type to think things over too hard, and soon the mystified expression was replaced by a grin; he leaned forward. "Sit over here. The blinds are down, but it's nice and warm. We were napping here."

"It's a good place to nap, but not for class," Nakamoto, who had been watching Fujisaki's cheerful expression, said lightly.

It took Fujisaki a moment to find his tongue. "I guess that's true. I'm no good at listening; I might fall asleep. Nakamoto, wake me up if I fall asleep."

"How do you know I won't fall asleep myself?"

The two had been close since freshman year. They were total opposites: Nakamoto was taller than Asou, while Fujisaki was short and petite. They even had opposing personalities: Nakamoto was calm and collected, and Fujisaki was lively, cheerful, and easygoing, so he had a lot of friends. Asou could be one of them. It wouldn't be strange if Fujisaki had mentioned his friend Satori Okada from Linguistics. That would explain why the man knew his name.

Maybe Fujisaki told Asou about me? Satori thought.

"Okada, can you sit there without falling asleep?" Asou asked softly, looking down at him. It wasn't the same strong, intense gaze from before; his eyes were calm and gentle.

He's so handsome; I thought he'd be unapproachable, but he's not at all. Satori felt a strange tenderness as he nodded. "I dunno. I think I'd be okay, but what about you, Asou?"

Asou smiled at the question and Satori couldn't help but smile back. Asou's lips formed a real smile. He could see a flash of white, straight teeth. *Handsome guys have all the luck. All he has to do is smile, and he looks so cool.*

He gazed up at Asou, feeling strangely moved. Then Asou looked away, turning to face Fujisaki.

His profile is just as handsome, Satori thought.

"Hey, Fujisaki, Nakamoto. Okada'll wake you guys up if you fall asleep," Asou said, walking toward the window. Satori could only follow after him.

After that, Asou would wave a little whenever they ran into each other. Satori would smile back. Gradually, they started talking. They were more than mere acquaintances, but not close enough to call each other by their first names. That was what their relationship was like until the day they slept together.

Soft kisses, one after the other. Lips that tasted him sometimes—devoured him others. He gasped, trying to catch his breath, and then those hungry lips searched for him again. He parted his mouth as if to beg, and finally his chin was lifted, granting him room to breathe.

"Ha..."

But before long, his lips were covered again. Satori gripped the corner of the bookshelf that he'd been leaning up against. Otherwise, he thought he might collapse, as there were no strong arms holding him up.

"Mm..."

The man's warm tongue caressed the inside of his mouth. As the sensual feeling of it turned to ecstasy, Satori thought, *Not again.*

The rumors he'd heard about Asou that afternoon were still stuck in his mind. He'd wanted to ask straight out whether the man had a girlfriend, but now that Asou was kissing him, Satori didn't care about anything else.

Maybe I just really like making-out.

Asou's lips left his, and Satori could feel Asou sigh softly. He opened his eyes slowly, and Asou's shining gaze came into view.

"Asou?" Satori's voice was so husky, he almost didn't recognize it. He could feel the heat flood his cheeks at his own wantonness.

"What?"

As those black eyes, brimming with passionate colors, gazed into his, Satori forgot how to speak.

"Uh...never mind..."

"“Never mind”?"

"Yeah..."

"Okay," Asou whispered, and then he kissed Satori again.

The man's soft lips touched his, moved away, searched for his again, and then traced the outline of his mouth, only to move away again. Asou stroked Satori's lips with his greedy tongue, then bit down, devouring. Satori groaned low in his throat.

The kisses are more persistent than usual today. How long have we been kissing?

They'd returned to his apartment together and put their bags down. As he took off his coat, Satori had said something inane, like, "It's cold today." And then he found himself being kissed with one arm still inside his jacket.

"Mmm..." he groaned. The sound of his desperation was so vivid that he jerked back. When they'd gotten to the apartment, Satori had glimpsed the orange sunset out the window. But now, so much time had passed, the window and the room were flooded in dark blue.

This could be bad, Satori thought in the back of his hazy mind. The center of his body was aching faintly. But Asou wouldn't stop kissing him. If they didn't stop now, it could get really bad. Summoning the last of his common sense, Satori untangled his tongue from Asou's. But Asou grabbed his chin, stopping him.

Startled, Satori tried to move, but he found himself being thoroughly kissed. Even if he pushed Asou's fingers away, the heat buried deep inside his mouth kept their lips locked together.

"Mmm...uh..."

Unable to resist, Satori saw stars behind his eyelids. Asou finally drew back, and Satori used the opportunity to drag in a hurried breath. It wasn't enough, though, and as he gulped air, he realized how ragged his breathing was. The imploring sweetness in



the sound startled him. Last month they'd been drunk, but now they were both sober.

If you think about it...no, even if you don't think about it...it's obvious that two men kissing like this when they're sober is weird.

He knew it was odd, and yet, he couldn't push Asou off or run away.

Just because it feels so good? Or is there a deeper reason? This is not the time to be thinking about this! At this rate, we'll end up just like we did before!

If Asou put his arms around Satori, he wouldn't be able to resist.

What should I do? As Satori rallied his wits to think, he heard a sharp, electronic buzzing. Asou started at the sound, body stiffening, and his lips left Satori's. They were both panting. The sound of their breathing echoed through the room, along with the ringing cell phone.

"I think it's mine." Asou's whisper was sensuous and husky.

Satori nodded; Asou's breath tickled Satori's ear, confusing him. "Probably."

Asou had been gripping Satori's chin firmly, but now, he let it go easily. He searched hurriedly in his bag for his phone as the ringing grew louder. "Hello? Oh, it's you."

Satori stared blankly at Asou. The man stood there with the phone to his ear. Those kisses left Satori unable to move, but Asou was having a conversation as if nothing had happened. Aside from a slight huskiness to his voice, he was acting completely normal.

"Yeah...yeah. I got it."

Whoever was on the phone seemed to be nagging Asou. His eyebrows were drawn together slightly, but he didn't seem particularly bothered.

This is the first time his phone's ever rung when he's here. Who could it be?

"I'll be over in a little bit, okay? Yeah. Later." The phone beeped as he ended the call. "Satori..."

At the sound of his name, Satori came back to himself. He stretched back against the bookshelf and switched on the lamps. The room flooded with brightness and sharply illuminated Asou's angled face. The clear view brought Satori back to his senses; now, the passionate kisses they'd shared only moments ago seemed like a dream.

"Who was on the phone?" he asked. He let out a sigh of relief at the calm tone he heard in his voice. He would have been embarrassed if he couldn't get a hold of himself, especially with Asou acting so normal.

"Sorry, I gotta go." Asou twisted his lips in an apologetic smile.

Satori nodded. "Yeah, okay. Sure."

"I'm really sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Just be careful out there. It's pitch-black tonight."

Asou put on his coat and knelt in the foyer to put his shoes on. Looking down at Asou's face—which he was so used to looking up at—Satori felt strangely uneasy. What was this strange ache he felt?

"See you at school tomorrow," Asou said as he stood up, looking back at Satori. Even standing on the lower ground of the foyer, he was taller than Satori. "Satori..."

The sound of his name sent a sharp ache through Satori's heart. Those dark eyes teased out the pain and amplified it.

"See ya."

Asou turned and disappeared out the door with disappointing ease. Satori sighed as the door closed with a *thud*. His vision wavered, and he caught hold of the wall.

The intimacy of the way Asou said, "Oh, it's you." The way he'd said he'd be right there, as if he hadn't just been kissing Satori.

It must have been his girlfriend.

He'd missed his chance. He should have asked if it was his

girlfriend calling. And yet, Satori couldn't ask, because if he knew Asou had a girlfriend, it would mean the end of those kisses, wouldn't it?

Do I like kissing Asou that much?

But, Satori knew it wouldn't last. What they were doing was just something to pass the time. He and Asou were just friends, after all.

Satori sat down heavily. The ache inside him burned like fire. It screamed that kissing wasn't enough. Sighing hotly, he gazed around the room, until his eyes landed on the single bed in the corner of the room. He couldn't sleep in that bed, not like this. If he lay down on the bed, he knew he'd start to remember.

Those fingers that touched his bare skin like they were trying to make sure of him...those strong arms that held his aching body...the violent heat that plunged inside him...the smooth chest that he'd rested his head upon when he slept...the steady heart beat...the faint scent of cologne mixed with the delicious smell of Asou's body...the erotic sound of his breathing...that husky voice murmuring his name...

Satori wrapped his arms around himself tightly. He steadied his breathing, trying to calm down.

It was just a drunken mistake. It only happened because we weren't thinking clearly. We're just friends.

It was crazy to get so worked up while sober.

Calm down, he told himself. He concentrated on breathing slowly in and out. But the sigh that escaped his lips was hot and heavy, flouting his attempts.

What's going on? This is no good at all. I can't calm down. Why not?

Satori frowned sharply. The feeling of Asou as he clung tenaciously to Satori's heated body was overwhelming. His whole body trembled with the memory, which he'd felt only once. No, this wasn't just as simple as remembering. He was *aching*, as if Asou were really touching him. He felt as if his body would melt.

"Mm..."

Shocked to see his own fingers reaching for his groin, Satori quickly balled his hand into a fist. With his other hand, he pushed the fist tight to the floor. A heated sigh escaped from his tightly pressed lips, shaking him.

What's going on with my body? This has never happened before! This is crazy!

Even as a teenager, Satori had never been very interested in sex. Of course, he had needs like everyone else his age, but they never seemed as desperate as those of his classmates. Physical pleasure had always seemed far too fleeting to really captivate him. That was how he'd reached twenty still a virgin, having never even stepped foot into the red-light district.

But it was clearly the physical desire—his lust for Asou—that was controlling him now. It was completely overriding the common sense on which Satori had always prided himself. It was his desire to feel that lithe body again. Satori hadn't known he possessed any desires strong and passionate enough to defeat his common sense.

His mind swirling, Satori wondered if it could be the kisses that drove him so wild. He realized his hand was reaching out toward his groin again, but this time, he couldn't stop himself.

We've been kissing for so long now, that I don't know what's dream and what's real anymore.

Even if Asou didn't have a girlfriend, they couldn't keep doing this.

We're just friends, Satori thought, and felt his chest ache. The pain was sharp, and for a moment, he couldn't breathe.

The next day was overcast; the sky filled with heavy gray clouds, threatening snow at any moment. Despite the wind that whipped through the trees, the campus was full of students exchanging notes and ideas about what would be on the exams.

Satori gazed at the sky and sighed, mindless of the almost-festive bustle around him. The white steam of his breath spread out into the sky, disappearing seconds later.

The weather was always cloudy when he was depressed like this. Satori heaved another sigh as he let himself get caught up in the crowd heading toward the dining hall. He felt like he'd already used up a lifetime's supply of sighs.

Last night, he'd been unable to calm his heightening emotions until he took care of the tension himself. Then he'd buried himself under the *kotatsu* and fell asleep, feeling wretched and trance-like. But he couldn't sleep in his bed because it reminded him of Asou.

Under the *kotatsu*, Satori had slept lightly, waking several times during the night. Today, his body was heavy, with a listlessness born of sleep-deprivation and violent self-loathing.

He'd been weird last night, no question about it. He had to make sure that such a thing never happened again; he had to stop kissing Asou—no matter what. He just had to be direct about it. Then they would go back to just being friends. That way, remembering about Asou wouldn't get him hot the way it had the night before.

It was simple. Satori knew that, but...

"Okada!" A hand clapped him on the shoulder and he jumped. "Did that really scare you?"

Satori turned around to find Fujisaki and Nakamoto standing there. Fujisaki had been the one who clapped Satori on the shoulder.

"I was just thinking about something," Satori said.

"You don't look so hot." Fujisaki's frown was worried.

Satori struggled to form a smile. "I just haven't slept much because of studying."

"It's not like you to lose sleep over exams, Okada," Nakamoto said softly.

Satori laughed evasively. Nakamoto was right. It wasn't the exams he was losing sleep over.

"That's true. You're pretty dependable when it comes to that

stuff," Fujisaki agreed.

Nakamoto muttered, "It's unlike you."

"Me, on the other hand," Fujisaki said. "I put it all off until the last second and end up staying up all night before the test...hey, Nakamoto, look what you made me say!" Fujisaki joked, looking around with wide, startled eyes.

"Hey, where's Asou? It's weird not to see him with you."

Satori laughed bitterly. His friend had asked the question in a way that said it was obvious. Even these two took it for granted that he and Asou would be together.

As the three of them started walking, with Fujisaki in the middle, Satori said, still laughing, "It's not that unusual. I mean, we don't hang out that much."

"Really? You've been together a lot lately," Fujisaki said, shaking his head.

Over the top of Fujisaki's head, Nakamoto watched Satori calmly. "Okada, you don't seem to get it, so I'm going to come straight out with it. You and Asou are really striking together."

"Not me; Asou's the one who's striking."

"You really don't get it," Fujisaki said.

Nakamoto was nodding thoughtfully.

Fujisaki said, "I mean, sure, no one stands out as much as Asou, but Okada, have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror? You're not bad-looking, but your eyes are something else."

"What do you mean, 'something else'?"

"Special. How can I explain it? Like, they bewitch you. They pull you in. They're...what do you call 'em again, Nakamoto?"

"Bedroom eyes."

"Yeah, that's it!" Fujisaki nodded.

Satori slapped him lightly. "You're a dumbass. When we were kids, you used to say my eyes were creepy because you couldn't tell what I was thinking."

"Well, maybe I'd thought that when I was a kid, but, right, Nakamoto?" Fujisaki had a habit of deferring to Nakamoto when he

couldn't explain something.

Nakamoto was used to it and nodded slightly. "You've got the definition of bedroom eyes: big black pupils that always look moist, heavy eyelids, and long eyelashes..."

Fujisaki nodded like this explained everything.

Nakamoto looked over Fujisaki's head. "Some of the girls who say they're coming over to talk to Asou actually want to talk to you."

"No way." Satori gave up. Maybe his eyes did leave an impression on people. But they weren't "bedroom eyes."

"Yes way. It may not be as much as Asou, but we do hear rumors about you."

Satori glared at Nakamoto, who seemed to know it all.

Then Fujisaki tugged on his arm sharply. "Hey Okada, over there!" he whispered.

There was a tall man standing in front of the brick wall of the dining hall. In his black cargo pants and black and white striped shirt, he looked like a slender beast of prey. Even in the crowd of students, he stood out.

There was only one person it could be: Asou.

Next to him stood a slim girl; she had pretty, bobbed hair. It was hard to tell from so far away, but her features were fine, and she was very beautiful. The snow white coat she was wearing looked amazing on her.

"Wow, talk about some seriously beautiful people. I've never seen Asou's girlfriend before. I wonder who she is. Do you know, Nakamoto?"

"I don't recognize her. I don't think she goes to our school." In contrast to the overly excited Fujisaki, Nakamoto was perfectly calm.

Satori could only stare at Asou and the girl. It was like his eyes were glued to them. He couldn't look away.

That's Asou's girlfriend. She's pretty. They look good together. She must be the one who called him yesterday.

It had been obvious that Asou wasn't irritated by the call that had ended their kissing so abruptly. Asou's lack of expression wasn't a lack of emotion; he just didn't let his emotions show. Satori knew that well, after spending every day with him for an entire month.

The couple seemed to be having a serious discussion. Satori could only stare at them.

So the rumors are true. We really do have to stop, Satori thought. Dimly, he realized that the idea was really getting to him.

"Hey! Okada, what's up?" Fujisaki asked, surprised to see Satori turn away.

"I just remembered something I have to do," Satori said, without looking back as he took off. His chest ached as though his heart was burning. Was it because he had to stop kissing Asou? Would something like that hurt this much? Was that really the only reason?

If they stopped the make-out sessions, they could go back to being friends. Stopping would be the best thing for both of them. So why was he getting so torn up about it?

A month ago, Asou had been expressionless and kind of scary, but basically, a nice guy. Nothing more. Satori had never imagined that they'd kiss, let alone sleep together. And none of his wildest dreams ever made him think that kissing could turn him on the way it did.

What's Asou thinking, kissing me? He has a girlfriend. Doesn't that make it cheating?

No, it wouldn't be called cheating. That would make Satori the other woman, and Satori wasn't a woman at all. Maybe it was nothing but a little fun for Asou. After all, Asou had never tried to touch Satori since the night they slept together. Asou had only kissed him.

But why would he want to touch Satori again? Why would he want to sleep with a guy?

Asou was just having some fun. Just fooling around.

But even if Asou was just fooling around, it didn't answer the

question of why he'd kissed Satori. Satori really had no idea what Asou was thinking.

Suddenly, Satori remembered that there had been another time when he hadn't known what Asou was thinking...

It had been a week before the end-of-year party. Satori had been alone in the classroom when he'd been joined by a girl he knew. He hadn't seen her in a while, since she'd been backpacking abroad and hadn't come to classes for some time. She had started to tell him about her experiences living in India for a month. He'd been so absorbed in her stories that he hadn't noticed Asou was there until Asou had tapped him on the shoulder. Satori had looked up and smiled.

Asou's fine features had been carefully schooled, but it wasn't his usual lack of expression. There had been something hot and hard hidden in the depths of his dark eyes.

"What is it?" Satori had asked, worried at the unfamiliar expression. Asou only glanced at the girl sitting next to Satori. A tense silence followed and Satori's skin prickled with a strange nervousness. What was the suddenly heavy atmosphere about?

After a few moments, the girl had stood. "Okada-kun, I just remembered I have to pick something up at the school store."

It was as if a spell had been broken. Satori nodded. "Yeah, okay. I'll see you later." He watched her go.

Asou hadn't said a word. Without asking Satori's permission, Asou sat down in the seat next to him. Satori pulled away without thinking, but it was like Asou's long limbs were giving off a burning heat. It was obvious that Asou wasn't quite himself. Satori had glanced up, and Asou's returning gaze was hard.

"So I can't sit next to you or something?" Asou had asked, staring at Satori. His tone was accusatory, as though he thought

Satori was trying to shut him out.

Satori shook his head frantically. "No, you can."

"Are you two meeting up later?"

"What?"

"You and that girl," Asou spit out. Satori had never heard him so agitated.

"No, I'm not meeting up with her."

"But you said you'd see her later."

"It's just an expression. I'm not meeting her anywhere."

Satori shook his head vehemently, but Asou had eyed him suspiciously. Satori could feel that unwavering gaze burning into him. He returned it tentatively, and Asou frowned. The change in expression made Satori feel uneasy, and he found himself hurriedly apologizing.

"It's true. I haven't seen her in a while, so we were just catching up. She went backpacking, and she was telling me about it. That's all. We just happened to run into each other. We didn't make plans to meet up later. I swear," he added.

Asou blinked and his dark expression finally cleared. He'd been leaning toward Satori, but now he moved back. The heat that had been radiating off his toned body dissipated.

"What is it?" Satori asked, puzzled at this sudden change.

Asou laughed a little and then sighed. "It's nothing," he murmured, looking away. His fine lips twisted in a self-mocking sneer, so Satori hadn't really believed him.

What had been going through Asou's mind that day?

Satori could still remember the strange heat that had radiated off Asou's body. He laughed bitterly at himself. No matter how long he thought about it, he still couldn't understand it. The important thing was to stop kissing Asou. It wasn't fair to Asou's girlfriend.

Satori's eyes snapped open at the sound of the doorbell. His alarm clock read four o'clock. He had hurried from school back to his apartment and buried himself under the *kotatsu*. He'd been thinking, trying to ignore his heavy heart, and he must have dozed off.

Outside his window, the sky was growing dark. His arms had been folded on top of the *kotatsu*, and now they ached. His neck was aching too, as he'd fallen asleep in such an unnatural position.

The doorbell rang again.

"Satori, you there?"

It was Asou's voice.

Satori stood up reflexively, only to freeze, rooted to the spot.

What would happen if I let Asou in? If Asou kissed me? Can I push Asou away? What if I get worked up like the night before?

"Satori?"

Satori sighed. It would be all right. After all, he and Asou were just friends. They simply needed to go back to the way things used to be. Except for making out, they'd acted like friends all month. It would be fine. He'd be fine. He nodded to himself and headed to the door.

"I'm coming," he called. He unlocked the door, and opened it.

Asou stood there, holding a plastic bag from the supermarket in each hand. Through the steam from his breath, Asou's beautiful white teeth looked like shining pearls. Satori felt a pain shoot through his heart, and his hand shot up to his chest.

"Can I come in?"

Somehow, Satori managed to nod.

Asou smiled, looking relieved. "You went home early today, didn't you? You never skip class, so Fujisaki and Nakamoto were worried you might be sick."

"No. I just remembered something I had to do."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Asou slipped off his shoes and turned to look at Satori, his eyes unwavering. His fine eyebrows

were drawn together. "You look pale."

Satori tried to laugh, but failed. He couldn't do it. He managed to force the corners of his lips up in a smile, however. "I was taking a nap, so I'm just a little spacey. What did you buy today?" He had to change the subject, because he couldn't meet that intent gaze.

Asou nodded and put the bag he'd been holding in his right hand down on the counter. "I thought we could have a hot-pot, so I bought ingredients for it."

"Oh, a hot-pot. Good idea." Satori peered into the bags. He was relieved to be able to escape Asou's eyes, but he felt strangely empty.

What's wrong with me? I've never felt like this before.

"Tofu, napa cabbage, carrots, *enoki* mushrooms, pork, noodles, and *ponzu* sauce. You bought a ton of stuff. I'll pay you for half later, okay?" Satori said in a cheerful voice, and Asou laughed a little.

"It's my treat tonight. I bought this, too." Asou put the bag in his left hand down on the counter. Through the plastic, Satori could see *saké*.

Satori froze. "*Saké*?"

"You don't like *saké*?"

"No, I like it fine, but...we can't have *saké*."

"Why not?"

"Why not? We..."

If they got drunk, it might lead to a repeat of what happened a month ago. As long as Satori was sober, he could stay rational. But if he got drunk, he wouldn't be able to keep from wanting Asou to touch him. That's what Satori had realized the night before—just how much he wanted it. He wanted Asou to touch him; he wanted Asou to make love to him. But now that he knew Asou had a girlfriend, he had to avoid that at all cost.

"I mean, we have to study tonight," Satori said after a moment.

Asou narrowed his eyes at Satori. Satori looked down, but

he could feel Asou's eyes burning into him, urging him to look up. He'd imagined those eyes would be feverishly bright when he looked into them, but they were surprisingly calm.

"Take a break for one day. You'll make yourself sick," Asou said, and his voice was as soft as Satori had ever heard it.

Relieved, he smiled awkwardly. "*I can do that, but you don't have a day to spare.*"

"Satori."

At the sound of his name, Satori flinched.

What should I do? There was no way he could go back to being just friends, not when the mere sound of his name on Asou's lips made him react.

"Satori," Asou said again. Without warning, he grabbed Satori's chin, forcing it up roughly.

"Asou..." Satori cried.

Asou sucked away his cry.

Satori stared into Asou's almond-colored eyes, which were centimeters from his. Those soft lips moved on his, caressing and searching, and he closed his eyes tightly. White-hot heat burned onto the back of his eyelids, holding the pleasure at bay.

We can't! We can't do this!

"Oomph!" He put both hands on Asou's shoulders and shoved. As always, Asou wasn't actually touching Satori, so it didn't take much to push him away.

"Satori," Asou said, straightening up. He didn't seem flustered or angry.

"C-cut it out!" Satori realized his voice was shaking. He took a deep breath. "You have a girlfriend, don't you? I saw her today. We can't do this anymore. Even if you're just fooling around, this is going too far. It's not fair to her."

Satori's voice was still shaking as if he would start crying.

"Satori, what about you?" Asou's voice was calm.

Satori looked at those familiar dark eyes. Those eyes were just as calm as Asou's voice—calm like the sea on a night without wind.



"Have you just been fooling around? Is that why you never stopped me? Even that first night?" Asou looked over at the bed, and Satori could feel his cheeks grow warm. "Were you just fooling around then?" Asou asked.

Satori looked away. "It's not a question of fooling around or not...we...we were drunk that night."

"So, you'll sleep with anyone when you're drunk?"

Satori was shocked at such a frank question. He saw Asou looking down at him steadily. The man didn't seem to be teasing.

What did he just say? With anyone? I'll sleep with anyone?

Anger welled up inside Satori. "Asou!"

Asou avoided Satori's fists easily and said as calmly as ever: "That's what you're making it sound like."

Satori was so angry that he was shaking. "I wouldn't sleep with anyone, drunk or not!"

Until he'd slept with Asou, Satori had never gotten drunk and had sex. He'd been a virgin. How dare Asou treat him like he was some lush? If he hadn't wanted to sleep with Asou, Satori would have resisted. He would have punched Asou. He hadn't been *that* wasted. How the hell could Asou say something like that? Did he actually think that Satori was that easy?

"Think about it, Satori," Asou implored. "Why did you sleep with me? Why do you let me kiss you?"

Satori was too angry to listen. "Go home!"

"Satori..."

"Go home!" Satori yelled. He turned away violently. He couldn't even look at Asou anymore, he was so angry. He shut his eyes tightly.

"Think about it, Satori. I'll be waiting," Asou whispered gently.

Satori stood there, staring at the floor. He heard Asou put on his jacket, and then he heard the door open and shut softly. Besides the sound of the clock, the only other noise in the room was his heavy breathing.

Think about what? About why kissing Asou doesn't gross me out?

Where does Asou get off ordering me to think about things—when he hasn't even given any explanation for the kisses? What a goddamned coward!

Satori may not have pushed him away, but Asou was the one who'd had sex with Satori, the one who'd kissed Satori, when all the time he'd had a girlfriend.

"Asou, you jerk," Satori muttered, as a tear fell down his cheek. His heart was aching as though it would break. Satori sank to the ground, clutching his chest. He couldn't stop the tears from falling. All he could do was stifle his sobs as he cried.

The room was pitch-black by the time Satori finished crying. His head was pounding. He hadn't cried like that in ages. The room was freezing because the heat wasn't on, but he felt hot and heavy. His throat was dry.

Satori couldn't summon the energy to turn on the light, so he sat in the dark kitchen and slowly pulled the refrigerator door open. The soft light from the fridge hurt his eyes. He took out a bottle of mineral water, blinking against the light, and unscrewed the cap. He put it to his lips, and let the cold water fill his mouth. It was colder than he'd expected, and he gulped it down greedily.

His thirst quenched, Satori heaved a sigh of relief. But the pain in his heart remained. It wasn't something that he could fix with a drink of water. Satori clutched at the front of his sweater and breathed deeply. The pain didn't fade—if anything, it was fiercer than ever.

"So you'll sleep with anyone when you're drunk?" Satori could hear that calm voice say. He pressed his lips together tightly. He thought he'd cried all the tears he'd had to cry, but his eyes began to fill again.

Satori's anger had disappeared, and all that was left in its place was misery and regret. *Is that what Asou thinks of me? That was a pretty shitty thing to say.*

Of *course* Satori wouldn't sleep with just anyone. He had slept with Asou because...because he was *Asou*.

The second he thought it, Satori's heart skipped a beat.

What would I have done if it hadn't been Asou, but some other man? Or what if it had been a woman?

Asou shook his head, forehead pressed against his knees.

No.

He wouldn't want that. He couldn't imagine sleeping with anyone but Asou. Just imagining sleeping with a man who wasn't Asou made his skin crawl. He wouldn't even want to sleep with a woman. He wouldn't want anyone else to touch him so intimately, and he wouldn't want to touch anyone else, either. No way. He only wanted to do that with Asou.

A sharp pain shot through him, so severe that Satori squeezed his knees reflexively. His mind...no, every strand of hair, every inch of flesh all the way to the tip of his nails, every fiber of his being was full of desire for Asou. As if to prove it, a hot, melting sigh escaped his lips: "Asou...Asou..."

He had thought that calling Asou's name would lessen the pain, but it only made it worse. His temples throbbed, and his vision began to blur. "Asou!"

I love him.

The words floated unbidden into his mind. For a moment, he hesitated.

That's ridiculous. Asou's a guy. I'm a guy!

That's what his common sense was shouting. But his brain was too numb to think any further.

I love him.

The words flashed through him again like a magic spell. And this time, his common sense didn't resist. It couldn't. He didn't want anyone but Asou. Asou was the only one for him.

I'm in love with Asou.

These burning emotions, this fierce desire to make Asou belong to him, it couldn't be anything but love.

"I love him," Satori whispered, and the emotions crashed over him. He'd thought of Asou as a nice guy—calm and quiet. Satori had convinced himself that it was because Asou was so striking that he was always watching Asou. He'd convinced himself he'd slept with Asou because he was drunk, and that kissing Asou had felt too good to stop.

But none of that was true.

Satori was in love with Asou. That was why he hadn't hated sleeping with the man; that was why he didn't resist the kisses; and that was why it always felt so good. The reason he hadn't asked why Asou kissed him was because he'd been afraid that Asou would say he was just having some fun.

It wasn't because Satori was addicted to kissing that he hadn't been able to stop—even after he'd found out that Asou had a girlfriend. He hadn't wanted Asou to be in love with someone else. But he couldn't forgive Asou for having a girlfriend. It hurt even to think about Asou kissing someone else.

Satori was jealous of that girl in the white coat. He didn't want Asou to kiss anyone but him. He didn't want Asou to look at anyone but him. He'd slept with Asou because it was Asou. Because he was in love with every part of Asou.

Satori pressed his lips together, unable to stop himself from trembling. The reason it had taken him so long to understand his feelings was because Asou was a man. If Asou hadn't had a girlfriend, it probably would have taken him even longer to figure it out.

"Think about it," Asou had said.

And then what? Satori wondered. *What am I supposed to do after I've thought about it? I love Asou. Not as a friend; I want him to belong to me. I want to kiss him. I love him. So now what?*

Now that he knew, what could he do about it? Not only did Asou have a girlfriend, but Satori was a man. Nothing could come of it, even if Asou didn't have a girlfriend. This love was over before it began—a distorted love that could never be returned. Satori's first

love—the first time he'd ever felt anything so strong.

"Mm..." His tears welled up against his closed eyelids. *Asou, you idiot.*

There was no way that Satori could go back to being just friends, not after he knew how he felt. He couldn't even bear to be near Asou. Satori muffled a sob that threatened to escape.

"*I'll be waiting,*" Asou had whispered. Satori realized now that Asou's voice had been full of tenderness.

Waiting for what? Asou really is an asshole. How could he say—and in such a tender voice—that he'd be waiting, when today might be the last time we ever talk?

Satori trudged to the library to find only a few people there. Soon it would be filled with students coming to study for exams. The first floor of the college library had desks at which students might study, each desk having a florescent light making it a great place to read without being bothered.

Satori sat down at the desk in the farthest corner. The heat wasn't circulating yet, so it was still chilly. Satori threw himself down on the desk without even bothering to take off his coat. His temples were throbbing because he'd been crying so hard. He'd spent the whole night crying, but he didn't feel any better. He hadn't eaten since morning, but he just wasn't hungry.

To top it all off, the reflection staring back at him in the desk's mirror looked horrible. His face was pale; his eyes were puffy and red; and his cheeks were hollow. He looked so awful that he'd almost stayed home. But he ended up leaving the apartment. He wanted to be alone, but somewhere that wasn't his place. When Satori was there, all he could think about was Asou—about the feel of his lips and the warmth of his arms.

Satori sighed. His love for Asou was still burning inside him as fiercely as it had the night before. All he could feel was despair; he knew his love would never be returned. To have to give up on Asou, to have to forget him, when Satori loved him so much...

"*Think about it. I'll be waiting.*" Satori squeezed his eyes shut

as Asou's voice echoed in his head. *What do you mean by "wait," Asou? Wait for what?*

"Hey, did you see that chick with Asou yesterday?"

Satori jerked his head up. The voice was coming from the desk next to him. It was a male student, but Satori couldn't see who was sitting there because of the partition.

"Yeah, she was really hot. I could *never* talk to her. You think she's Asou's girl?"

"Maybe. Her name's Yasumi Takahashi, but she doesn't go here."

"How'd you find all that out? That's creepy."

Satori pricked up his ears. The two were whispering, but he could hear their voices clearly in the quiet library.

"Just listen: I saw her at Aiga Community College."

"Aiga? That's where your girlfriend goes, right?"

"Yeah. I remembered her because she won the beauty contest at the school fair. That wasn't the only reason I remembered her, though. She's *married*."

"Whoa, seriously? Does that mean Asou's her husband?"

"Her last name's Takahashi, you dumbass. They have different last names. Sachiko said her husband is some old artist."

"So she's having an affair with Asou?"

"I doubt they'd meet out in the open like that if they were having an affair."

Satori jumped to his feet before the students even finished speaking. The two boys sitting there stared at him, looking startled. They smiled awkwardly. They must have known Satori hung out with Asou often. Satori stared back at them, expressionless, and then he collapsed back into his chair.

An affair? Asou? Satori clenched his hands into fists. Hatred toward the woman in the white coat welled up inside him. *They're having an affair? That woman has a husband who loves her, and she wants to take Asou's love, too? Or has Asou fallen in love with her?*

"I'll be waiting."

He could hear Asou's voice again, and suddenly it was like a light went on inside his head.

Hold on. Something isn't right. Something is breaking down here.

Satori relaxed his hands.

That's right. He'd never once asked Asou what he was thinking. He was just jumping to conclusions, here. He'd never asked Asou about the woman in the white coat, or why Asou kissed him every day, or how Asou felt about him. Asou was the only one who knew the truth, but Satori had been too scared of losing Asou to ask.

Satori got to his feet slowly.

If Satori couldn't go back to being friends with Asou, he was going to lose him anyway—because no matter how much he loved Asou, he couldn't be with him. So he at least wanted to know the truth. He wanted to know what Asou was thinking.

Asou, I've thought about it. I love you. I don't want to give you up to anyone. That's how much I love you.

He'd thought it over just like Asou had asked, and that was the conclusion he'd come to. He'd rather die than tell Asou all that, but he at least wanted to know why Asou had kept kissing him.

Satori ran to the front gate and then stopped suddenly. He didn't know where Asou's apartment was. He had it written down in his address book, but Asou had always come to see Satori. Asou had never invited Satori over, and Satori had never gone over to Asou's on his own. Satori sighed.

Come to think of it, I don't know much about Asou. Satori was the type to collect data and analyze it. He was always careful not to overlook anything. But when it came to Asou, there were huge holes in his research. It was like he'd jumped head first into a river, without testing the strength of the current or the depth of the water. There was a good chance he'd drown.

Satori laughed at himself and then sighed again. He leaned

against the side of the gate and got out his address book.

"Satori-kun?"

The voice was clear and pleasant, and Satori couldn't help looking up.

He flinched when he saw the snow-white coat. It was *her*. The woman he'd seen with Asou yesterday was now standing in front of him, sporting a mischievous smile.

"Oh, good; I've been looking for you." She nodded a little. Her smooth hair fluttered gently. Her skin was so pale, it was almost translucent, and her face, with its petite features, looked like a doll's. She was even more beautiful up close. "I'm Yasumi Takahashi. Where's Naotaka?"

Naotaka? Satori thought, but then he remembered that "Naotaka" was Asou's first name.

"I haven't seen him today."

"Oh, he's not with you?" she asked.

Satori shook his head automatically.

Yasumi hummed at that, and then reached out and touched his arm. "Why don't we wait together in that coffee shop? We can see Naotaka coming out the gates."

"Huh? Wait..."

Yasumi dragged him after her. They were right in front of the school gates, so the area was full of students. Some people looked up at the beautiful woman who had appeared, but no one spoke to them.

"This college is a really good school, right? The girls and guys here are really hot. I wish I could retake my exams and go here. Oh, but then I could only be with Naotaka for two years..."

Satori finally managed to find his voice as Yasumi walked on through the gate: "P-please, wait a second, Takahashi-san."

Yasumi came to a surprisingly smooth stop and turned around. "What?"

"What...um, what's going on?"

"Going on?" She gazed up at him with her clear brown eyes,

and suddenly Satori was at a loss for words. She really did look like a beautiful doll.

"Well, I mean, how do you know who I—?"

"Naotaka didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"He didn't ever mention me?"

No, *he hasn't*. Satori had just seen them talking together, looking friendly with each other. A sharp pain shot through his heart at the memory. This woman was Asou's lover. It didn't matter whether it was an affair, or if she wasn't married at all. Asou had kissed this woman. Asou had held her in his arms.

The base of Satori's skull was suddenly hot. A wordless passion welled up in his throat. But Yasumi just looked at him, completely unaware of what Satori was feeling.

"He really hasn't mentioned me?"

Satori couldn't answer her. All he could do was press his lips tight against the emotions that were choking him.

Yasumi arched one finely shaped eyebrow. Then she looked away and said in a fierce whisper, "That idiot..."

When Yasumi finally looked up at Satori again, her expression was apologetic. "I'm sorry, Satori-kun. He didn't mean anything by it. It's Naotaka's fault for being so lazy."

"Huh?"

"Really, how can he just abandon a sexy guy like you?" Yasumi asked, linking her arm with his and starting to walk again. She was far stronger than her fragile frame suggested.

"Takahashi-san, I'm going back," Satori said, trying to get her to stop.

"Why?"

"Well, you're meeting up with Asou, right? I'll just be in the way."

"I'm not meeting him. I just came to check up on him."

"Check up...? Hold on..."

As Satori tried to shake off Yasumi's arm, a voice called,

"Yasumi!"

He looked over his shoulder to see Asou running toward them. Satori tried to bolt, but Yasumi's arm held him fast.

"Takahashi-san, please!" Satori cried, panicked. He couldn't bear to watch them together—not so up close. But he couldn't very well confess his feelings in front of Yasumi. He was the one who'd fallen in a love with a guy who was already taken.

Yasumi gripped his arm tightly and didn't let go. "Don't run away, Satori-kun. Give him a taste of his own medicine. There's no reason for you to be the only one worrying."

"What do you mean?"

"It's okay. Leave it to me," Yasumi said with a smirk that seemed out of place on such a beautiful face. She glared at Asou as he caught up to them. "What do you want?" she asked cuttingly.

"Me? What do *you* want?" Asou panted, glaring back at Yasumi.

"I came to see how you and Satori-kun were doing. You really are thick, you know that?"

"What do you mean, thick?"

"You didn't tell him anything. I thought you talked to him yesterday and settled it all. What the heck are you doing, making Satori cry his eyes out like this?"

Satori just stood there, overwhelmed by Asou and Yasumi, who glared at each other dangerously; but then, he flinched. He'd known he didn't look good, but he hadn't known it was obvious that he'd been crying. He hurriedly looked down at the ground. He hadn't wanted Asou to know he'd cried. He didn't know what to say if Asou asked him why. It wasn't like he could tell Asou he'd been crying because he was in love with him.

Satori was pressing his lips together, embarrassed at the sheer awkwardness of the situation, when Asou grabbed his arm.

"Stay out of my love life!" Asou threatened, pulling Satori toward him.

Satori looked up in shock.

Asou hugged him tightly. "And stop groping Satori like that!"

"If that's how you're going to be, you shouldn't have asked me to pretend to be your girlfriend in the first place! And don't call me 'Yasumi.' The only one who's allowed to call me that is Mitsuru-san." Yasumi balled her hands into fists and started pounding Asou's stomach.

"Oomph!" Asou coughed.

Yasumi snorted. Then she turned back to Satori, who was standing there in shock, and smiled at him. "I'm sorry, Satori-kun. I'm not Naotaka's girlfriend. I'm his aunt."

"His *aunt*?"

"Right. I'm Naotaka's mother's brother's wife."

His aunt. His aunt? What is going on here? Satori looked up at Asou, feeling totally confused.

Asou was glaring at Yasumi, his eyes watering. "Don't say anything else. I'm gonna tell him."

"Oh, you are? You're sure taking your time about it. I came here to talk to Satori-kun, but then you show up. Too bad." Yasumi sighed and then looked over at Satori with a renewed smile. "Well, I guess I'll have something to look forward to. Satori-kun, my nephew is an idiot, but I hope he makes you happy."

Yasumi bowed slightly and then walked off without waiting for an answer.

Satori watched her slim figure go; he stood rooted to the spot.

What's going on? What's Asou going to tell him? That girl isn't Asou's girlfriend? She's his aunt? But she's so young...He didn't get it at all.

"Dammit, she's got a black belt! Why'd she have to hit me so hard?"

The growling, low voice by his side brought Satori back to himself. Asou still had his arms around Satori. He was so warm. Hot, even. A tear slipped, unbidden, down Satori's cheek. Satori



covered his face with his hands. He couldn't stop. He'd thought he'd cried himself out last night, but the warmth enveloping him made him so happy and yet, so sad, that he couldn't keep himself from crying.

It wasn't just the kisses. I wanted him to hold me like this. I wanted him to love me—not just with his body, but with his heart.

"Satori? Satori, what is it? Did Yasumi do something to you?" Asou's anxious voice floated down to him. He'd never heard Asou sound like that before.

Satori shook his head. *No, you're the one who did something to me. You're the one who made me feel this way.*

"I love you," Satori whispered. He hadn't meant to say it, but he couldn't hold it back any longer. "I love you. I love you, Asou." The whisper was almost a sob. He clutched tightly at Asou, unable to put into words the depth of the love he felt.

He forgot that they were on a busy sidewalk in broad daylight. He forgot that Asou might hate him now that he knew how Satori felt. All that mattered to him was the warmth of Asou's arms around him.

"Satori..." Asou said, his own voice full of emotion. "I love you, too."

Said in that deep voice, the words shocked Satori. He looked up to see Asou frowning, his dark eyes moist with heat.

What did Asou just say?

"We can't talk here. Come to my place," Asou whispered gently. He took Satori's arm and started to walk, but Satori couldn't respond.

I love you?

You love who?

Who did he say he loves?

The apartment that Asou dragged the still-dazed Satori to was a luxurious two bedroom with a living room, dining room, and kitchen. Asou brought him into the master bedroom. The only real piece of furniture in the room was the double bed, but the mats on the floor and pictures on the walls were tasteful.

Asou put one arm around Satori; with the other hand, he closed the door.

"Satori," Asou said, kissing him.

Still in a daze, Satori was completely unprepared for it, and just let himself be kissed.

"Mm..."

As those lips hungrily devoured his, Satori could feel Asou's arms and upper body press against him. He could feel Asou's heartbeat, and the heat of his lithe body was making Satori dizzy. Satori felt like Asou was the ocean, and he was drowning in the other man's passion.

They kissed, long and deep, and when their lips finally parted, Satori let out a moan. It was then that he realized: Asou was lying on top of him.

"Asou?"

"I'm sorry, Satori. I had to do it, or you would never have figured it out."

"Do what?"

"I don't have a girlfriend. I don't love anyone but you, Satori." Asou's usually calm voice was low and seductive in a way that Satori never could have imagined.

"No way..." Satori whispered.

"I've loved you since freshman year." Asou sighed, nibbling Satori's earlobe.

Satori arched as a familiar wave of pleasure shot up his spine. "Oh..."

"I fell in love with you the moment I saw you during Freshman Orientation. You were wearing a classy, dark-gray suit. Your hair was a little longer, and you brushed your bangs to the side, so your

eyes were really noticeable," Asou said, slipping Satori's jacket off his shoulders.

He lifted up Satori's sweater and shirt all at once. "Our eyes didn't even meet. I just saw you look up. But I remember the way your dark eyes moved under your lashes; they captivated me. I wanted you to look at me with those eyes. I wanted to make them mine."

No way. This has to be a dream.

"N-no. You're lying." Satori protested at the touch of Asou's cold fingers on his skin.

"I'm not lying. I've never looked at anyone but you. I love how you never skip class, but you're not a bookworm. Or how nothing fazes you, because you analyze everything, so you always know what's going to happen. How you have no idea the effect your eyes have on people."

Asou continued to whisper sweetly to Satori, which eventually stopped his struggling. With every word, Satori could feel just how earnestly Asou wanted him to believe every word he was saying.

"I learned all of that by watching you, and it made me so happy. It made me love you even more."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not."

"But then, why didn't you just..."

"I'd never fallen in love at first sight like that, so it took me a while to recognize my feelings for what they were. I just couldn't stop thinking about you, and I couldn't take my eyes off you. Finally, I realized why," Asou whispered huskily, before covering Satori's lips with a kiss.

Satori could sense the sincerity of Asou's words through that kiss. It melted down into his heart like sweet honey, making him weak.

Can it be true? Can Asou really be in love with me?

"I finally got up the courage to talk to you sophomore year, and I was so happy when we became friends. You saw me, you



talked to me, you laughed with me. I knew you were straight, so I tried to convince myself I was satisfied with just being your friend. But I couldn't keep lying to myself. The closer I got to you, the more I loved you."

As he continued his passionate confession, Asou bit lightly at Satori's neck, and Satori felt his body responding.

"But I couldn't repress my feelings. Just watching you almost made me lose control. I decided I had to make you mine at the end-of-the-year party. I thought about it every day."

Satori had been holding himself up with his arm, but he let himself fall to the sheets. His stiff body grew limp, and he felt his legs opening slowly.

So, that was the reason for the heated gaze from Asou that day in the classroom. Asou had hounded him about his presumed meeting with the girl because Asou was jealous.

Satori closed his eyes as joy spread through his body. He was so happy that he wanted to cry. Asou was really in love with him. Only a man in love would make love so passionately, so gently, he was certain. Satori stretched out on the bed, giving himself over to Asou's caresses.

Before Asou, Satori had never slept with anyone—not when he was sober, and not when he was drunk. Maybe even as far back as a month ago, on that very night, Satori had wanted Asou to be in love with him. Maybe he had asked Asou what he would do if his ideal woman didn't exist because he'd wanted Asou to see him as someone special.

"I'm sorry, Satori. I've been in love with you for almost two years, and I didn't know what else to do. But no matter how much I loved you, it was cowardly of me to take you like that."

"'Cowardly'?" Satori repeated, his voice husky.

Asou nodded as he kissed his way down Satori's jaw-line.

"It wasn't the alcohol that made me do it. I wasn't really that drunk. When I kissed you, you didn't push me away, and then I couldn't help myself..." Asou's voice was low and passionate; his

breath tickled Satori's ear. "But you thought I was drunk."

Satori grabbed at the shreds of his fading consciousness to ask the question that had been puzzling him for so long. "But after that night...you never did anything except kiss me... Why?"

"If I'd slept with you every time we saw each other, you'd think I was just horny, and I didn't want that. I slept with you because I was in love with you." Asou undressed Satori layer by layer, leaving red marks on his newly exposed skin. Satori's body arched with every one of Asou's masterful kisses.

"You're always so logical. I was sure that eventually you'd ask me about that night. But you never mentioned it, and you never pushed me away when I kissed you. Sometimes, I wondered if you were just...easy."

"You...didn't...think..." Satori's senses clouded as Asou bit his chest. "Ah!"

"But, I knew from watching you that you weren't the type of guy to sleep with just anyone. So I started to think that you liked me, but you just didn't realize it."

Asou was exactly right. Before he'd heard the rumors of Asou's girlfriend, Satori had written off the pleasure of Asou's kisses as a by-product of lust.

"So I decided to find out what you'd do if you heard that I had a girlfriend. I knew you might not believe it if it was just a rumor, so I asked my aunt to play along with me. I stood there with her that day, sure to be where you'd see us. Then, if you had kept on kissing me after that, I'd have known you really didn't have any honor."

"Asou." Satori gathered what little reason he had left and glared at Asou.

Feeling Satori's eyes on him, Asou looked up, staring at him intently. "I thought you'd either tell me we had to stop kissing—in which case I'd know you only thought of me as a friend—or you would realize how you felt about me and try to step down. But you tried to step down *and* go back to being friends without ever asking me how I felt..."

Asou reached down between Satori's legs, making Satori's back arch at the sudden wave of pleasure that engulfed him.

"I really wanted to kiss you—to take you into my arms and make love to you. Because I knew you were jealous of Yasumi, which had to mean you loved me back..."

"Asou..." Satori clutched at Asou, rocked by sensations far greater than what he'd felt a month ago. He trembled with pleasure as Asou's smooth, heated skin rubbed against his own.

Asou's low voice whispered in his ear: "But I knew if we slept together, we'd be back where we started again. You'd just confuse your feelings for me with the physical pleasure you felt. I didn't want that to happen."

Again, the man's hot breath tickled Satori's ear, and he felt his whole body responding to that.

"I decided to wait until you told me that you loved me." Asou held him even more tightly. "Satori," he murmured tenderly. "I love you."

Satori's breath grew shallow as Asou kissed him deeply. The kiss was feverish, more passionate than any they'd ever shared. He could only nod at this passionate confession. He marveled that the words "I love you" could change everything, even the temperature of a kiss.

"What about you? Do you love me?" Asou asked, his body trembling.

"I love you," Satori answered, rocked by a pleasure so fierce it was almost painful. "I love you. I love you, Asou."

He tried to say it again, but all that escaped his lips was a moan.

It was three days before exams, and the campus was seething with excitement. The classrooms where the more difficult courses were taught were in chaos. Satori stole a glance at Asou, who was

sitting in the seat next to his. Asou was copying down his notes; he looked like a model in his bright red shirt and beige chinos.

The notes Asou was copying were Satori's.

Nakamoto and Fujisaki, who had come to borrow his notes before, had warned Asou that while Satori's notes were easy to understand, they didn't do any good if you didn't understand exactly what they all meant.

"I told you they wouldn't help you much," Satori said with a smirk as he peered at the other boy's serious profile.

Asou looked up from the notes and shrugged. "I told you I didn't care. I'll stop when they stop helping even a little."

"We've only got three days; you should stop now. How many times are you planning on writing them out?" Satori realized that this wasn't something they should be discussing in public, and he quickly covered his mouth. He could feel his cheeks grow hot as he blushed all the way down to his neck, which was covered with hickies beneath the turtle neck he'd borrowed from Asou. He turned to face front, embarrassed by the memories of the night before; he could tell Asou was holding back a smile.

"Man, Satori...I wish exams were over."

"They haven't even started yet."

"Once they're over, we can stop thinking about them. Then..."

Satori glared at Asou, not letting him finish the sentence. Even in a busy classroom, you never knew who was listening.

"I thought you'd be more relaxed about this," Satori said softly, still glaring.

Asou's face grew serious. "Satori..."

"What?"

Asou tilted his head and brought his lips up to Satori's ear. "Stop looking at me like that. It's making me really hot."

Satori's cheeks flushed hotter than ever. He quickly looked away as memories of the night before came flooding back. "What are you talking about?"

"Satori..."

"What?"

"I love you," Asou whispered.

Satori stared at him in surprise. Asou's expression hadn't changed, but his dark eyes shone with happiness. Somehow, Satori could believe that Asou really had been in love with him since their freshman year. Asou seemed so happy that his love was finally returned. He'd been bubbling over with happiness since last night.

Thinking back on it, Satori realized how important it must have been for Asou to speak to him in the hall that April. At the time, Satori hadn't noticed it, but now, he realized just how happy Asou had been when Satori had said his name. He'd seemed overjoyed that Satori knew it.

Satori could feel a smile tugging at his lips, and he quickly schooled his expression. Asou was watching him tenderly.

"Asou, Okada."

Satori looked up to see Fujisaki walking over, with Nakamoto following behind him.

"What's up? We didn't see you two yesterday..." Fujisaki asked, as he and Nakamoto sat down.

"Not much. We just had to go do something," Asou said easily, his eyes on Satori.

Satori looked down, feeling the heat from his lover's gaze.

"What? Did something good happen?" Fujisaki asked innocently.

Asou looked up. "Why do you think something good happened?"

"Well, you both look really happy."

"Both of us?" Satori asked.

Fujisaki nodded. "You and Asou both look really happy."

Satori's hands flew to his cheeks. He thought he'd had his expression under control.

Can they see it?

He could hear Asou chuckling beside him. Satori glared at

Asou, but Asou just looked back at him, his gaze heated. Glaring at him did nothing. Asou was happy that Satori was looking at him at all, even if it was with anger.

"Oh Asou...?" Nakamoto, who had been watching the three of them silently, spoke suddenly. "Everyone's saying that girl with the white coat yesterday is your girlfriend. Some people are even saying she's having an affair with you. It doesn't seem like she's your girlfriend to me, but you should probably set the record straight."

Asou finally took his eyes off of Satori, and Satori sighed a little. When Asou stared at him like that, it made him think about what they'd done last night.

"You're just as sharp as ever, Nakamoto. You're right; she's a relative of mine. You can't stop people gossiping, though. Just let them talk." Asou nodded generously.

Nakamoto's eyes widened. "You really okay with that?"

"If anyone asks me about it, I'll tell them, but I don't think I need to go around denying it. People are just going to say whatever they want to anyway."

"If you say so, Asou."

The night before, Asou had explained to Satori that Yasumi Takahashi was married to his uncle, Mitsuru Takahashi. Mitsuru Takahashi was a modern artist, known mostly for his *object d'art* and his sculpture. Even Satori had heard his name before, and he knew nothing about art.

Yasumi had been in Asou's class in middle school, and through him, she'd met Mitsuru. Despite a seventeen-year age difference, Yasumi had married Mitsuru. And because Asou was closer to his uncle than his parents, and he saw Yasumi often, he had asked her to pretend to be his girlfriend. Yasumi had agreed to help on one condition: Satori and Asou had to have tea with her one day. Yasumi loved to observe the people around her, and she was dying to see what kind of man Asou had finally fallen for.

"She'll probably come to see us before too long. Sorry. Would

you mind hanging out with her?" Asou asked apologetically the night before.

"Nah, I don't mind, but...did Yasumi-san know I was a guy the whole time?"

Asou had laughed a little. "Both my uncle and Yasumi are bi, so they don't care about stuff like that."

Satori was completely at a loss for words.

Asou added casually, "I mean, I'm bi, too."

"I'm...totally lost..." Satori whispered.

Asou had pressed a kiss to Satori's forehead. "But you're the only one I want. You're the one I'm in love with."

And he'd spent the rest of the night proving that to Satori.

"Well, she sure was pretty," Fujisaki whispered dreamily.

"Don't judge a book by its cover, Fujisaki," Asou replied lightly. "Any man other than her husband is no more than a punching bag to her. If you don't watch it, you'll get a swift blow to the stomach!"

"What? She's married?"

"Yeah. She's my uncle's wife."

"Really? She's our age, isn't she? I can't believe it," Fujisaki whispered, clearly impressed.

Nakamoto had been listening to the conversation in silence, but suddenly he spoke: "Is this really okay?"

"What?"

"You're in love with someone else, right? What if *they* get the wrong idea?"

Asou and Satori both stared at Nakamoto. At the same time, Fujisaki's jaw dropped.

Man, he's sharp...

Asou broke the awkward silence with a short laugh. "It's okay. I explained the situation."

"When you say 'explained,' you mean you told them exactly how you feel?"

"Pretty much." Asou nodded lightly. He threw a glance to

Satori as he did so, and Satori quickly looked away.

Nakamoto watched the two of them: Satori looking down at the ground, and Asou looking at Satori. Nakamoto nodded to himself and said, "That's okay, then."

However, Fujisaki wasn't willing to let the subject drop as easily as Nakamoto had. "No, it's not okay. Asou, who're you in love with?"

"It's a secret."

"Come on, tell me! Does she go to our school?"

"I told you it's a secret," Asou answered calmly. Beneath the table, he twined his fingers around Satori's. Satori looked up in surprise, but Asou just gave him a blank expression.

Fujisaki changed tactics, turning to Satori: "Satori, do you know who it is?"

"I..."

"Tell me. I won't tell anyone!"

"I don't know." Satori blushed as Asou squeezed his hand. Last night, they'd fallen asleep holding hands like this.

"Give it a rest, Fujisaki. The professor is here." Asou nodded at the front of the room with his chin, while he still held Satori's hand tightly.

The professor had just walked into the room. Fujisaki turned around to face front. The room fell silent; the professor was one of the few teachers who were still strict about talking in class. But Asou didn't let go of Satori's hand. They were sitting so close together that the chance of a student behind them noticing was slim, but it still made Satori nervous. Luckily, Asou was holding his left hand, so Satori scrawled on his notebook: *Let go.*

Asou stole the pencil from Satori. Using his left hand, wrote in bold letters: *NO.*

Satori was taken aback. *No? What did he mean "no"?*

He'd thought that Asou would be smarter about his relationships. He hadn't seemed the type to keep up an unrequited love for almost two years, and he hadn't seemed the type who lost

sight of everything but his boyfriend once he started dating. Of course, Satori had never thought that *he* would be that boyfriend. He'd never even dreamed that the day would come when he would love someone like this.

Satori glanced over at Asou. Asou gazed back at Satori. His almond-colored eyes were full of passion, and Satori felt himself falling into them.

I want to kiss him, he thought suddenly. *I want to share those new, feverish kisses.*

Asou wasn't the only one who'd fallen hard. Satori laughed to himself and squeezed Asou's hand. Asou squeezed back. A feeling of relief welled up inside Satori at the firm pressure of Asou's hand on his. He picked up the pencil again. In small letters he wrote: *I want to kiss you.*

Asou stared at him, eyes wide, and then he took the pencil from Satori. Satori looked at his lover's awkward scrawl, and smiled.

ME TOO.

THE END



HOLD ME TIGHTER

Hold Me Tighter

He was so warm. So nice and warm. He was half-awake, but felt too good to open his eyes. Yesterday was Sunday, which meant that today was Monday. But it was Golden Week, so they didn't have school. He could sleep a little longer.

Satori Okada shifted, trying to get comfortable. His body felt heavy, especially the area between his legs. He must be hotter than usual because the sheets felt cold against his bare shoulders. Satori frowned.

What's going on? Do I have a cold?

As he was trying to analyze what was going on with his body, someone hugged him softly, brushing against his cheek.

Satori opened his eyes slowly.

He saw a slim, tanned neck; a delicate collarbone; and a firm, muscular chest. He could make out faint reddish marks here and there, from the collarbone and all down that ripped torso.

"Sorry, did I wake you up?" a voice asked, low and gentle.

Satori jerked his head up.

Delicately arched eyebrows; sharp, almond-colored eyes; a fine, straight nose; and a firm mouth. Blinking, he gazed at the perfectly formed face of Naotaka Asou, who, in the past month, had become closer to Satori than anyone else in the world.

Asou really was gorgeous. Satori couldn't look away.

But why's Asou here? he wondered dimly. Suddenly, his eyes snapped wide open. *Of course. He stayed at Asou's last night.*

Satori felt his cheeks grow hot as the night's memories came flooding back to him. The reason for his body's heaviness and high temperature wasn't a cold. It was because of what they'd done. The marks on Asou were scratches that Satori had made.

"What time is it?" Satori asked, rubbing his eyes in an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

"Only eight," Asou answered.

Though they'd made love all night long, he was still embarrassed to wake up next to Asou.

"We don't need to get up yet. Let's sleep a little longer," Asou murmured, pulling Satori toward him.

"But I'm awake now," Satori said, settling into Asou's arms.

Asou raised his head and peered at Satori. "Yeah, you're awake, but you must be feeling pretty wrecked. We went a little overboard last night." The words were light and casual, but Asou's voice was honey-sweet.

"You call that 'a little'?" Satori asked. He tried to glare at Asou through his lowered lashes, but he ended up laughing.

Asou's beautifully formed lips spread in a happy smile. "You think it was more than that?"

"If that was a little, then we're going to have problems," Satori told him in a husky voice. He frowned and then looked away, cheeks flushing.

Last night, as Asou made love to Satori, Asou had unlocked all the secrets of Satori's body without mercy—secrets that Satori himself hadn't known. But last night hadn't been the first time they'd made love. They'd been dating for three months already. Whenever they had the time, Asou would make passionate love to Satori—so passionate that Satori's common sense went on vacation. The effect that Asou's caresses had on Satori was so profound that Satori was afraid he might become an entirely different person. The pleasure was too strong to feel shy about, or keep his head. But when he thought about it while his wits were about him, Satori was really embarrassed.

"Satori, are you angry?" Asou stroked Satori's hair with long fingers.

It felt so good, Satori found his eyes drifting shut. "I'm not angry."

"Really?"

Satori nodded. "I'm not angry. I'm just a little...embarrassed," Satori whispered, turning his face away.

Asou let out a sigh of relief. His fingers trailed down Satori's hair to trace his jaw-line. Lifting up Satori's chin, Asou gazed at him with such dark, warm eyes that Satori couldn't look away.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. This is a secret between the two of us."

"That's why I'm embarrassed."

"What for?" Asou asked gently. He kissed Satori softly. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about. I'm the only one who knows just how cute you are."

"Hearing you saying that is even more embarrassing," Satori whispered into the space between their lips.

Asou laughed softly. "That makes you even cuter," he whispered back before kissing Satori again. The kiss was gentle, like a caress.

"Idiot..." Satori muttered around the kiss. He closed his eyes, figuring this make-out session would be a long one. The feeling of Asou's wet tongue slipping past his teeth and into his mouth instantly melted Satori's embarrassment. He kissed back, his arms going up around Asou.

Until he'd met Asou, Satori had never known that kissing could feel so good. Asou had taught him that—along with the comfort of falling asleep wrapped in another's warmth—as well as sexual pleasure so intense that it made his head spin. While dating Asou, Satori had learned how his heart could burn with love for one special person.

"I love you, Satori," Asou whispered huskily, and Satori felt a twinge in his heart.

It was something he'd been feeling a lot lately. He was able to be with Asou, but even while they were making love, he felt uneasy. He felt like the ground was about to crumble beneath his feet. He loved Asou and Asou was the only one for him. He didn't want to

be apart from Asou, even for a moment. He wanted Asou to be with him always, and to have eyes only for him.

The more time he spent with Asou, the more clearly Satori realized that every fiber of his being was focused on Asou. Everything else paled in comparison. Satori had never felt emotions so strong or passionate. He could no more control these emotions than he could deny himself the physical pleasure. He felt like if he let his guard down, his heart and body would belong to Asou completely.

Every time Asou told Satori he loved him, every time Asou made love to him, Satori realized just how much he loved Asou in return; the strength of that love shocked him. He felt like it would sweep away everything else, and he couldn't help having reservations.

There must be something wrong with him. To love Asou this much, to be unable to think about anything but Asou? It was crazy.

How long can things go on like this?

Satori had never imagined that someone would become his whole world, and the strength of his love for Asou frightened him.

"Satori?" Asou peered at him in concern, but Satori just lay there, frowning in silence. "You okay? You sore?" he asked gently.

Satori shook his head. "No, it's nothing." He smiled.

Asou kissed him tenderly. The gentle kiss sent Satori into ecstasy. When Asou kissed him that way, all his uneasiness disappeared.

"Asou!" he cried out.

"Hmm?"

"I love you," Satori said without hesitation.

Asou's perfect face softened with happiness. "I love you, too," he said, and then kissed him.

The kiss grew deeper, and Satori could only kiss back, in a trance. He kissed his lover as if trying to swallow the words Asou had spoken, so that they would dissolve the pain and uneasiness in his heart.

"You're not going home for Golden Week?" Asou asked, peering into the refrigerator.

Satori was sitting at the table with his chin in his hands, gazing at the slender lines of Asou's body. He nodded. The clock on the table said it was eleven in the morning. After they'd indulged themselves in bed, they'd fallen asleep again.

"I only go home for New Year's. I just get in the way at home."

"In the way? Why?" Asou shut the fridge door and turned to look at Satori.

Satori noticed Asou's almond-colored eyes were wide. He waved his hands frantically.

"I don't mean it in a bad way. Didn't I even mention it? My brother and his wife live close to home, and last year, they had triplets. So my mom and dad have their hands full now, taking care of all of them."

Asou made an affirmative noise, looking happy for some reason. He held out a bottle of mineral water to Satori. Satori took it and murmured thanks.

Asou sat down, and Satori gazed at him. Asou really didn't have any angle from which a person could see him and think of him as anything other than handsome. He wasn't even wearing anything special, just a black t-shirt and jeans—but with his sculpted body and fine features, Asou looked completely polished. The off-white kitchen was the perfect setting for him, like it were a showroom.

The kitchen wasn't the only room that looked like it was from a magazine. The building belonged to Asou's uncle, who was a famous modern artist. All the interiors, from the furniture to the decorations, were very tasteful and sophisticated.

Satori had never been in a beautiful apartment like it before he'd become friends with Asou. He came from a normal, middle-class family. When he'd entered college, he'd moved into a normal apartment.

Even the house his brother had bought when the triplets were

born was just a simple, two-story home that had been built fifteen years ago.

"So, triplets, huh? I bet they're cute."

"Well, they're cute when they're asleep. It's funny; they do everything at the same time: wet their diapers, cry for milk, and fall sleep, so it makes things really noisy." Satori couldn't help smiling, and Asou nodded happily again.

Asou didn't express his feelings much; that, combined with his perfect looks, made him seem cold. But Satori knew that Asou wasn't. Asou was the calmest, most composed person Satori had ever met. But he could also be surprisingly shy and passionate.

According to Asou, he had been in love with Satori from the moment they'd started college. But Satori had never noticed Asou's feelings; he'd only thought of them as friends.

It was four months ago that their relationship had changed. Satori had invited Asou back to his apartment after an end-of-the-year party. Asou had been so busy fending off all the girls that were flirting with him, he hadn't had time to drink. Satori had felt bad for him, and invited him over.

Out of the blue, Asou had kissed Satori. Satori hadn't minded at all, so one thing led to another, and they'd ended up sleeping together.

A month passed, and Asou hadn't confessed his feelings or touched Satori, but they kept on kissing. Asou hadn't wanted Satori to think that he'd slept with Satori just because he was drunk. He'd decided that if he didn't press Satori for sex, then Satori would believe Asou really was in love with him. Asou had believed that if he just kept kissing—and only kissing—Satori, eventually the young man would ask him why. Then, he would confess his feelings.

But Satori hadn't asked. Nor had he pushed Asou away—because it felt so good when Asou kissed him. It took Satori a while to realize that it wasn't lust that made those kisses feel so good, but that he was in love with Asou. Finally, though, he told Asou he loved him.

Not only was it the first time Satori had ever told anyone that, it was the first time he had fallen for someone so hard that his heart felt like it would break. It was also the first time that the person he loved admitted that he loved Satori back.

So when he heard Asou's declaration, Satori had been happy. Of course, he was still happy. He loved Asou, and Asou loved him. He knew that there was nothing to worry about. But somehow, he couldn't help it. Part of him was still scared.

Satori wasn't scared *of* Asou. He was scared of his feelings *for* Asou, because they were so strong. He was so used to thinking logically, but the love he felt wasn't something that could be explained through logic. What scared Satori was the fact that he couldn't predict the outcome of the situation that he was in.

"What about you, Asou? Aren't you going home?" Satori asked brightly, trying to shake himself from his thoughts. He was sure that as long as he was with Asou, all of his worries would disappear.

Asou took a drink of water and shook his head. "I don't need to go home. Yasumi is dying to see you, though. I know it sucks, but you'll still come with me on the sixth of next month, right?" Asou knitted his brow, looking pitiful.

Satori couldn't help laughing.

"Yasumi-san will get pissed if you call her by her first name. Call her 'Auntie.'"

Asou sighed. "Aunt Yasumi is okay, but I can't call her *Auntie*..."

Yasumi Takahashi was married to Asou's uncle, Mitsuru Takahashi, who was seventeen years older than her. Satori and Asou were supposed to see her on May sixth.

Yasumi had just graduated from college and that spring, she had moved to the United States with Mitsuru. Satori and Asou had gone to the airport to see her off, but they hadn't had much time to talk to her.

After a month of just kissing, Asou had finally gotten fed

up with Satori for not asking about their situation, so he'd enlisted Yasumi to pretend to be his girlfriend. This deception was to figure out how Satori felt. The plan had worked, forcing Satori to face his true feelings. So, in a way, it was thanks to Yasumi that they were together.

"How's Yasumi-san doing?"

"She speaks English fluently because she lived in the U.S. for a while, so she's doing great there."

"That's good to hear. Tell Yasumi-san I can't wait to see her." Satori smiled and took a drink. The cold water felt good sliding down his throat. He must have been thirstier than he'd thought.

"Satori..."

"Hmm?" Satori had been about to take another sip, but he put the bottle on the table and turned to look at Asou. The previously pitiful expression had been replaced by one far more serious. Satori sat up straighter. "What is it?"

Asou's eyes, gazing into Satori's, were completely serious. "I'm thinking about going to the States after graduation."

"The States'?" Satori repeated blankly.

Asou nodded. "I want to study at a college over there."

Finally, it hit Satori that Asou was talking about going to the United States after graduation. He blinked at this sudden news.

"Why?"

Asou looked away from Satori, staring down at the can in his hands as if the answer was written there. Then he looked up. "Satori." His dark eyes were filled with a strange light. "It might be a little too soon to say this, and I hope it doesn't bother you..." Asou murmured, his voice lower than usual. He sighed. "Satori, I want to be with you forever. To do that, I need to be able to do my job so well that no one cares if I'm gay. No discrimination in the workplace. That's why I want to go to the U.S. to study."

Satori stared at Asou with wide eyes. He understood how Asou felt. Satori wanted to be with Asou, too. But "forever" was a big word.

"Forever?" Satori repeated. "What do you mean by 'forever'?" Satori asked again, like he was a child who didn't understand the concept.

Asou smiled slightly. The smile that curved on his perfect lips was very like the one he'd given Satori the first morning after they'd slept together. That shy, bashful smile was Satori's favorite. He didn't think it was an expression anyone else got to see.

"For our whole lives, if you want."

Our whole lives. Satori was struck dumb by those sudden words. *Our whole lives. Our whole entire lives? That means...*

"I'm not asking for an answer right away. We've still got a while until graduation. But you're going to start working somewhere by the end of the year, and I think it'll be too late to talk about it then. That's why I'm telling you now," Asou said calmly, his eyes never leaving Satori. "I want to have a place in your plans for the future. I'm serious about you. So please think about it."

The next day was warm and bright—a sure sign that spring had come in earnest. Even the light breeze felt balmy.

Satori's first class was English Reading, where they studied Sociology texts in their original English. The class was a requirement for all Sociology majors, which meant that the college assigned the students to the course automatically.

But Asou had been put in a different timeslot, so the seat next to Satori was empty. Usually, Satori's friends, Yousuke Nakamoto and Daichi Fujisaki, sat next to him or in front of him. Today, however, there were both absent.

Thinking about it, Satori realized that the two boys had been acting strangely before the Golden Week break. Nakamoto had been agitated, while Fujisaki had lost his usual cheer. Satori was under the impression that Nakamoto had been refusing to meet Fujisaki's eyes.

They must have had a fight.

That was unusual. Satori had been friends with both boys since their freshman year, and he'd never seen them bicker. The disagreement had to be serious for them to skip a required class. Satori thought about this, barely listening to the heavily accented English being read by the students around him.

"Animals low down on the evolutionary scale, such as most species of insects, are..."

The text they were reading was *Sociology* by Anthony Giddens, a well-known work that had been translated into Japanese.

If I go to the US, I'll have to speak English... Satori thought, and then he laughed a little.

Obviously.

If he was just going on vacation, that would be one thing; but if he was going to live there, he'd definitely need to know English. But even though he was studying Language Arts, Satori had never been good at English, not even in high school. He'd had to take English Reading in his sophomore year, too, and it had always depressed him. He had to concentrate hard to understand even the simple English being spoken in the class right now.

When Satori read English books, he always had to look up every other word in the dictionary. Of course, sociology books used a lot of terms not found in every-day conversation, so he would need to look up even more. But Satori was well aware that even his simple English was bad.

Satori sighed.

He loved Asou. He didn't want to give Asou up to anyone else. He wanted to be with Asou, always. Nothing made Satori happier than hearing that Asou wanted to be with him forever. And it *had* made him happy. Just thinking about the fact that Asou loved him that much made Satori smile. But, a part of him wasn't thrilled about it. Asou had said he wanted to be in Satori's future.

Just what does that mean? Is he telling me I have to go to the U.S.?

Satori could use his remaining time in college to study like crazy to learn enough English so he could go with Asou when he went to school in the U.S.

What would I do, though? He couldn't even imagine. Would I just sit around waiting for Asou to come home every day?

Satori hadn't really given the future much thought. He realized he was getting stuck on the words Asou had used, becoming fixated on the phrase "our whole lives." It wasn't as if he had a dream job in mind. And he didn't particularly want to go to graduate school, either.

Maybe it was because his brother had just had the triplets and he was around toys more often now, but he thought that it might be nice to work in a company that made such games and gadgets. But even that was just a vague idea. He really hadn't thought beyond the fact that he just wanted to work at a normal nine-to-five company.

Normal. What's normal?

Satori figured that loving Asou automatically excluded him from being normal. It wasn't that loving Asou felt weird. His love for Asou made complete sense to *him*. But as far as the rest of the world was concerned, it wasn't natural. Just the idea of telling his parents and his brother about his relationship with Asou scared Satori.

Asou had admitted to being bisexual, but that was probably normal for Asou. Gorgeous Asou, with his posh apartment and his uncle, the modern artist. Stunning Asou, who turned heads wherever he went.

Satori had the feeling that "normal" for him and "normal" for Asou were two completely different things. Waves of unease washed over him.

Can we make it work in spite of everything? Can we really spend the rest of our lives together the way Asou wants? Can we really live on love alone? Even when that love scares me?

Satori's heart fluttered, and he clutched at the front of his shirt.

The next moment, he jumped as an unfamiliar husky voice called, "Hey! Class is over!"

It was true: Class was over. A few students remained in the room, but the professor was long gone. Satori looked at his watch. It read "9:55," which meant class had ended earlier than usual.

"You're Satori Okada, right?" the voice asked.

Satori looked up, meeting the eyes of the man in the seat across from him. He had a handsomely featured face with slightly drooping eyes and a high nose. It was a sweet face, complimented by his bleached hair. He was flashy—the type of man Satori would have remembered if he'd seen him before. If nothing else, Satori was sure he'd never seen the man in English Reading.

"That's right. You need something?" Satori looked at him warily.

The man smiled, his white teeth glinting. "I'm Shunpei Iizuka. I'm a freshman in the Science and Engineering Department."

Satori frowned. *What does a freshman in engineering want with me?*

The question must have been written on Satori's face, because Iizuka leapt from his seat and went to stand in front of Satori. He wasn't very tall, but he had a nice body. "I figured I'd have a good chance of catching Naotaka if I was with you." Iizuka looked down at Satori and smiled cheerfully.

Satori felt a twinge in his heart. This was the second person he'd met who had called Asou by his first name. The first person had been Yasumi.

"Do you know Asou?" Satori asked, being careful not to let his displeasure show.

Iizuka nodded. "I guess you could say I've known him for a while. I'm not seeing anyone right now, so I thought he might be up for fooling around again," Iizuka said easily.

Satori peered up at the stranger. It was obvious that when this guy said "fooling around," he didn't just mean hanging out. Which meant only one thing.

Satori gulped.

This guy wants to ask Asou to fool around? Just like that? Why? What for? He'd said that they'd known each other a long time. Is he an ex-boyfriend who wants to get back together? Why now?

As Satori sat there, his mind racing, the bell rang. Iizuka was still standing there, looking down at him curiously, as if he was waiting for Satori to say something.

"Satori?"

Satori gasped at the sound of that familiar voice. Asou popped his head in through the half-open door. His eyes crinkled happily when he saw Satori.

"Satori," Asou said again, coming into the room, but then he froze when he saw Iizuka standing there. The smile was wiped clean from his face and he frowned. "Iizuka?"

"Long time no see, Naotaka," Iizuka said innocently. He ran over to Asou. It was obvious that he was through talking with Satori. "It's been about a month since we last saw each other, hasn't it? You're just as hot as ever!"

Iizuka had come far closer than necessary, and Asou took a step back.

"What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? I'm a freshman in the Engineering Department. Hey, would you believe it if I said I went here just because you do, Naotaka?" Iizuka took another step forward and peered up at Asou.

"Bullshit. You'd never do something so commendable. What do you want?" Asou's tone shocked Satori a little. It was cold and beyond rude.

This wasn't the Asou Satori spent all his time with, or even the Asou he saw talking with his friends from school. The man's expression was a stony one that Satori had never seen before. It left no room for Satori to jump into the conversation.

But Iizuka just smiled, unperturbed. "What do I want?"

That's cold. I'm not with anyone right now. Wanna fool around, Naotaka?"

"Thanks, I'll pass," Asou replied immediately.

Iizuka pouted. "You've been with Okada-san for a long time, right? I've seen you with him the whole time I've been here. You've got to be getting bored by now."

"Iizuka." Asou's tone was forceful, even though he wasn't actually yelling. "I'm not gonna fool around with you. Not now, not ever. How many times do I have to tell you? You're a pain in the ass. Get lost."

"Man, why are you so pissed? I get it. I'll come back later," Iizuka said, completely unfazed by Asou's glare. He turned back to Satori—who had been watching in amazement—and waved. "Okada-san, if you get tired of Naotaka, pass him over to me, okay? I still remember exactly what he likes."

"Iizuka!" This time Asou really was yelling.

With a yelp, Iizuka left the classroom.

A heavy silence fell. Satori sat there, frozen, staring at the door. His chest ached and his throat felt tight.

How does Asou know Iizuka? What does all this mean? Satori may have been a late bloomer, but even he could understand that conversation.

It would be stupid to think that Asou had never been with anyone before, not with his good looks. Even if Asou hadn't gone looking for partners, people would have approached him. He probably had a lot of experience. But Satori couldn't wrap his head around the idea of casually fooling around or getting bored of someone. It didn't make sense to him.

"Satori!" Asou called.

Satori looked up at Asou automatically, and their eyes met. Asou's eyes were dark and intense. Satori looked away again, even though he didn't want to. It was ridiculous to let his imagination get the better of him. He hadn't heard Asou's side of the story yet. But try as he might, he couldn't bring himself to look up. He couldn't

even move. A hot jealousy had welled up from the pit of his stomach, and it mixed with his earlier uneasiness.

"Satori," Asou whispered in his ear.

Satori stiffened.

"Do you have to go to your next class? I want to talk to you," Asou asked, his voice tense.

"Of course I do. Professor Horiuchi counts attendance." Satori's answer came out husky. He pressed his lips together tightly, feeling uneasy, jealous, and confused. He could hear all of those emotions in his voice, and he hated it. It scared him. This was a side of himself that he'd never encountered before.

"Satori..."

"I'll hear what you have to say later."

"I want to talk to you now." Asou grabbed Satori's arm—hard.

Satori couldn't help gasping; he knew the feel of those long fingers so well from the way they caressed him when they were in the bedroom.

"Please. Let me talk to you now." Asou's voice was desperate. Satori looked up slowly. "Satori..."

There was no trace of the earlier hardness in the face that gazed at him now, so Satori felt relieved enough to nod.

"Iizuka and I met when I was a senior in high school and he was a freshman. I met him through Yasumi; they went to the same school," Asou said as they walked slowly together.

Satori walked with his head down. The streaming sunlight was soft, and a breeze caressed his cheek. The ginkgo trees rustled softly. He was walking side by side with Asou, but his heart was far from joyful. It felt heavy, like it was made of lead. That had never happened before.

"Back then I...didn't really say no to anyone..." Asou faltered, like it wasn't easy for him to say. "Iizuka and I did it a couple times."

Satori bit his lip. He'd guessed as much, but it didn't hurt

any less to hear it. It wouldn't have shaken him so much to find out that Asou had dated people in the past, if Iizuka hadn't shown up. Imagining something and actually seeing it was different.

"But it only happened a few times. We didn't actually date, and I wasn't in love with him or anything. I haven't fooled around with anyone since I got to college. Obviously, that includes Iizuka," Asou continued calmly.

So Asou had slept with someone he wasn't dating or even in love with. It made Satori jealous, and he hated himself for it. But most men didn't need to be in love with someone to be turned on by them. Satori knew that there were people who just had sex for fun. He didn't think that was a bad thing. To each his own, after all. Besides, Asou had said he didn't do that anymore. Satori knew better than anyone else just how much Asou cared about him. But that didn't mean Satori wanted to think about Asou sleeping around. He didn't want to imagine it.

How can I be so obsessed with what Asou did before I even knew him? Satori thought, unable to suppress a shiver. That was going beyond possessive.

Satori continued to walk in silence, until eventually Asou called his name in a worried voice.

"Are you going to leave me when you get tired of me?" Satori asked.

The passing students glanced at them curiously.

Asou grabbed his arm, whispering hurriedly. "I'll never get tired of you. I've never felt this way about anyone before. I've never been in love before. You're the only person I've ever wanted to be mine—the only person I ever wanted to love me."

Satori came to a stop, his head still bowed. He knew that. He knew Asou's love wasn't a lie. He knew it was stupid to worry so much about the past. So why couldn't he shake the heaviness he felt?

"Asou."

"Yeah?"

"Do you love me?"

"I love you," came the unhesitating reply.

Satori felt his lips curve in a smile, but his heart was just as heavy as before. His chest was tight, and he couldn't breathe.

"I love you, too," he murmured.

Asou heaved a sigh of relief. He let go of Satori's arm and hugged him. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

Satori shook his head to let Asou know it was all right. He had thought that putting his feelings for Asou into words would make him feel better. But it hadn't.

Why not? I love Asou and Asou loves me. So why is this so painful?

"Hey, Satori. Let's skip the rest of our classes today."

"Huh?"

Satori looked up, startled at the sudden suggestion.

Asou smiled at him, the skin around his eyes crinkling. Satori couldn't look away from the gentle smile that lit Asou's face. He knew that smile was meant only for him. He'd never seen Asou smile like that at anyone else.

"Let's go see that movie you wanted to see, and then we can get something to eat," Asou said in a meltingly sweet voice.

Satori nodded. Even if he went to class, he wouldn't be able to concentrate. It would be better just to stay with Asou.

They walked through the gate and on a whim, Satori twined his fingers around Asou's. It was so rare for Satori to make the first move that Asou looked down at him in surprise. After a moment, he smiled happily again.

Satori smiled back as those long fingers squeezed his. Asou's fingers were warm in his firm grip. If Satori could just keep touching Asou like this, all his dark feelings would disappear. After all, Satori was the one with Asou now.

Satori felt his step grow lighter as he made his way back to his apartment. He took advantage of the swiftly falling night to hide his smile. Of course, he was still stuck on Iizuka. Sometimes the words "fool around" and "get tired of" would pop into his head, and then his chest would ache sharply. But the time he'd spent with Asou had gone a long way to ease those dark feelings.

Why do I care so much about the past? The important thing is the present.

I never knew I was this narrow-minded, Satori thought.

Knowing it was in the past didn't help to stop the jealousy or possessiveness that he felt. And yet, he didn't have the courage to ask Asou about Iizuka. He couldn't find the words, because he was too afraid of the answers he'd get.

Satori could feel his steps getting heavier. The strength of his love scared him. It also scared him that he couldn't imagine their future together. He was scared of everything.

What does Asou see in me?

"Okada-san."

Satori froze at the sound of his name. He knew that voice. He turned, and sure enough, Iizuka was standing in the light of the newly glowing streetlamps. The man smiled, his lips stretching carelessly.

What's he doing here? Satori felt both displeased and anxious.

"Evening. You alone?"

"Uh, yeah," Satori answered vaguely.

Iizuka pointed behind him. "I live just down that way. Do you live in the area?"

"I live down that way, too," Satori answered as calmly as he could.

Iizuka hummed in surprise. "I never noticed. You leave such an impression; I'd never forget you once I saw you."

Leave an impression? Me? Satori thought, plunging into self-disgust. He wasn't sure if Iizuka had it out for him, so there was

no reason to be in a bad mood. Asou and Iizuka weren't together anymore. It was over. Asou had told him, so it had to be true.

There is no reason to get angry, Satori told himself. He had to convince himself of that, or he'd start yelling at Iizuka, warning the man not to come near Asou again.

Satori noticed Iizuka was carrying a large tote bag.

"On the way home from school?" Satori asked, as calmly as he could.

Iizuka sighed dramatically. "Yeah; I had class all day. And next year, I'm gonna have lab, too. I thought I'd get to fool around in college, but I'm so busy."

"I've heard engineering is tough." Satori began to walk next to Iizuka, realizing he'd never get anywhere just standing there, talking.

"If I were better at Japanese, I would have chosen Language Arts, too. I'm good at English, but I suck at Japanese."

"But engineering should help you when it's time to get a job."

"I just started college; I can't even think about getting a job yet."

Walking side by side, it became clear that Iizuka was a little taller than Satori. He was flashy but not in a vulgar way. It was a calculated, elegant showiness. He was the complete opposite of Satori, who often came off as plain.

Iizuka would be able to stand next to Asou without being overshadowed.

Even his personality was completely different. Iizuka was cheerful and carefree. He came on a little strong, but he was very friendly. He was the total opposite of Satori, who was often told he was off-putting.

Iizuka would probably never feel uneasy, or get scared off by new experiences. He and Asou would probably work really well together.

Satori felt his heart skip a beat.

How many times had Asou slept with Iizuka? How had he made love to the man? How many times had they kissed? Had they shared those long, sweet kisses? Had Asou told Iizuka that he loved him? Had he said so in that low voice, even if it had been a lie?

"Oh, this is me," Satori said as calmly as he could when they reached his apartment building. Inwardly, he breathed a sigh of relief. He could finally get rid of Iizuka. Even if the man's connection to Asou was all in the past, he didn't want to spend any more time with Iizuka. He kept thinking all kinds of crazy thoughts.

"Oh, you live here? Which apartment?" Iizuka asked carelessly.

"On the first floor, on the other side of the building," Satori answered, wondering why Iizuka was asking.

Iizuka smiled a charming, mischievous smile. "I'd like to see your apartment. Can I take a look?"

"There's nothing to see in my apartment. It's a pigsty."

"Oh, I don't care," Iizuka replied, unfazed.

Satori stared. Iizuka might not care, but *he* did.

Seeing Satori was at a loss for words, Iizuka waved his hands. "I'm not asking you to let me in or anything. I'm just curious. I want to take peek."

"But why my room?"

"I told you; I'm curious. Have you got a girl waiting up there or something?" Iizuka gave him a curious glance.

Satori felt offended by that. He didn't want Iizuka to get the wrong idea about him.

"Of course I don't. Fine, I can make you some tea or something. Come on," Satori said shortly.

A grin split Iizuka's face. "What, really? Thanks! I'll take you up on that, then!"

Iizuka's carefree tone made Satori feel sick to his stomach, and he was glad that it was too dark for Iizuka to see his face.

"Oh, you have windows on the southern side. Lucky! My windows are on the east side, so in the morning, the sun's so bright

I can't sleep." Iizuka chatted away cheerfully as Satori took out his key.

What am I doing? Satori thought.

Why was he letting a guy he'd barely even talked to—whom he'd just met, and who had fooled around with Asou before—into his room?

But if he told Iizuka to go home now, Iizuka might say something weird to Asou. Judging from the way Asou had acted this afternoon, he probably wouldn't believe anything Iizuka would tell him. But if Iizuka came to Asou and told him that he had something to tell Asou about Satori, Asou might listen to him. And then they'd have to talk. Probably somewhere private. Satori really didn't want that. He wrenched the door open and went inside.

"Come on in."

"Thanks." Iizuka followed him in.

Satori heard the door shut, and then he heard it lock.

"One sec, I'll turn the light—"

Iizuka wrapped his arms around Satori.

"Hey! Wait, what're...?" Satori thrashed wildly, but he couldn't get free of the arms that caged him. "Let go!"

"Hey, don't struggle. I'll be gentle," Iizuka whispered, chuckling. He stopped Satori from moving like it was nothing.

Satori felt the color drain from his face. He and Iizuka had similar builds. Iizuka probably wasn't really any stronger than he was. But it was obvious that Iizuka was used to this kind of situation. Satori was shocked. That was why he couldn't throw Iizuka off no matter how hard he tried.

"Hey, what are you doing?!"

"What do think I'm doing? I like you, Okada-san. Your eyes are really sexy. You took me up to your room, so you're obviously interested." Iizuka giggled.

Satori felt a sharp pain at the nape of his neck. "Oomph..." He broke out in a cold sweat as he realized that Iizuka had bitten him.

The smell in his nostrils wasn't Asou's warm scent. The body

wrapped around him was completely different. Satori felt nauseated with disgust. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and a chill went through him.

You have to be kidding me!

"No! No! Let me go!" Satori struggled violently, but Iizuka held him tight.

"Hey, now. I told you not to struggle." Iizuka grabbed Satori's flailing arms.

Satori panicked. "Let go!" He tried to shove at Iizuka, but Iizuka used the weight of his body to slam Satori up against the wall. A dull pain bloomed in Satori's back and head, and he groaned. Iizuka took advantage of that to press Satori's limbs to the wall.

"Iizuka!"

"If you calm down, I'll make you feel even better than Naotaka does," Iizuka whispered huskily. His hot breath touched Satori's lips.

Satori squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head away. Iizuka's hands were still clamped hard around his wrists.

"You don't kiss?" Iizuka asked teasingly. He pushed Satori's knees open with his leg, and Satori gasped at such a wicked, skillful trick.

"Stop!"

No! No! No!

He didn't want to do this with anyone but Asou!

Iizuka watched Satori's throat as he swallowed.

"Hmm. Seems like you're pretty sensitive." His leg pushed in harder, rubbing against Satori.

"No!" Satori cried, but Iizuka covered Satori's lips with his own.

The feel of Iizuka's hot tongue forcing its way into his mouth made Satori dizzy. His throat tightened, and the urge to vomit rose up.

Why is this happening? Why do I have to kiss someone other than Asou?



Satori bit the tongue that was possessively probing his mouth as hard as he could.

"Ow!"

He tasted blood, and then the body pressing against his leaped back.

"Ouch! What the hell?!"

"Th-that's what I'd like to know!" Satori yelled, breathing hard. He was trembling, and his wrists were sore where Iizuka had been holding them. "What the hell were you thinking?!"

"What do you mean? You're sleeping with Naotaka, right?" Iizuka asked bluntly.

Satori found himself at a loss for words. No one had ever come right out and asked him that; he didn't know how to answer.

"I figured since you're sleeping with Naotaka, you'd let me do you, too."

"You thought *what*?!"

"You really don't get it..." Iizuka clicked his tongue softly. He turned back to Satori again. Satori stiffened automatically and was mortified to feel himself cower.

Iizuka watched him speculatively for a few moments and then gave a resigned sigh. "In high school, all the guys with Naotaka were like that. Including me. Naotaka never turned anyone down, but he didn't get attached to anyone, either. So he didn't care if the guys who wanted to sleep with him also slept with each other." Iizuka shrugged. "You were lucky if you got to sleep with Naotaka; and if you didn't, well, you'd just sleep with one of the other guys. So I figured I could sleep with you, even if Naotaka was a no-go..." Iizuka's voice had faded to almost a whisper by the end.

Iizuka stooped to pick up his bag. Then he turned to Satori, who was still frozen in place, and smiled. "That's what Naotaka was like two years ago. Anyone who knew him then will tell you the same. I don't know about him dating a serious guy like you. Maybe it's none of my business, but don't you think you ought to break up with him before he makes you miserable?"

Satori bit his lip at seeing the pity in Iizuka's eyes. He couldn't even say that it wasn't any of Iizuka's business. He couldn't move a muscle, but he wasn't sure if it was from the shock of Iizuka assaulting him, or the shock of the story he'd just heard about Asou's past.

"Well, I'm going home then," Iizuka said politely, and he left.

Satori slid to the floor when he heard the door click shut. Now, the trembling returned. He hugged himself tightly, but he couldn't stop. He was shaking so hard that his teeth were chattering. He glanced down at his wrists and saw finger marks on his skin.

He could hear Iizuka's voice in his head, asking, "*Don't you think you ought to break up with him before he makes you miserable?*"

Satori felt racked with confusion. Everything Iizuka had talked about was in the past. Asou wasn't like that anymore. He tried to tell himself that, but he could feel himself on the edge of panic.

Asou had said "our whole lives." Asou had said he was serious. He'd said he was going to the U.S. to study, so he could be with Satori. That had made Satori happy. But it hadn't felt real. Probably because the world Satori had always lived in was completely different from the world that Asou had lived in. He couldn't keep up with Asou.

Asou had said he wanted to study so that he could be so good at his job that it wouldn't matter whether he was gay or straight. But Satori didn't know if he could believe Asou.

Asou had always been bisexual, even before Satori and he started dating. So maybe Asou had planned to study in the U.S. even if he hadn't ever dated Satori. Maybe his plans weren't really for Satori at all.

On top of that, there were definitely sides of Asou that Satori didn't know about yet. They'd only been dating for three months, after all. He'd probably see many other sides as time went on. More people like Iizuka might show up. Someone that Satori didn't even

know could hurt him in ways he couldn't imagine. They might even steal Asou away from him.

What would happen to Satori then? He loved Asou so much, he couldn't imagine being with anyone else. So what could he possibly do if Asou left? What would happen to these emotions, to this stormy passion?

It made him so uneasy, it scared him so much, his heart ached.

"Asou..." Satori whispered, laying his head on his knees.
I love him.

Just thinking it made his heart burn. He felt a stinging behind his eyes, and before he could even grit his teeth, the tears began to fall.

He was scared to put his trust in Asou; especially if he would end up getting hurt. He was scared of any unknown situation. He wasn't brave enough to take first steps into a strange, new world.

And yet, Satori wanted Asou to love him. He wanted to be Asou's only love. He wanted to be the one who Asou loved most in the world. He didn't want Asou to hate him.

It was messed up. It was selfish. It wasn't fair at all and it never had been fair.

Satori's brother was older, and he had so much freedom—he was the type of person who said whatever he was thinking. He was emotional and successful, and he had their parents wrapped around his little finger. His brother had always made Satori lose his nerve. Satori always thought too much before he took any action, and he could never commit to anything.

But Satori hesitated to say that he wanted to be like his brother. That would be admitting that he had a brother complex. If he admitted that, he'd lose his pride.

Satori could say that he was a steady and dependable person, but in reality, he was just a coward. He was really just narrow-minded.

Satori hugged his trembling body tight.

If Asou knew how narrow-minded I was, he'd hate me.

"Are you okay, Satori?" Asou asked worriedly.

Satori forced himself to smile. "I'm okay. I told you, it's nothing."

"Yeah, but you don't look so good."

"I'm fine. I'm just nervous because I haven't seen Yasumi-san in a while."

"Are you sure? You don't have to force yourself." Asou peered at him, looking worried. Asou was dressed simply, in jeans and a t-shirt, but with his long, slender body, he looked amazing. Just standing there, almost every woman who passed by turned to look at him. Satori was dressed similarly, in a sweatshirt and jeans, but he didn't have the same presence.

They stood in front of the garden fountain by the train station, where they were supposed to meet Yasumi. The weather was so warm that some of the people who passed by were wearing summer clothes.

"You've been down lately. Are you feeling well?"

Satori stiffened as Asou brushed back his bangs with gentle fingers.

"Satori?" Asou asked dubiously.

Satori grew flustered. "Really, it's nothing. I'm fine."

"But—"

"Yasumi-san should be here soon."

They were supposed to meet up by two in the afternoon. The clock read ten of two, but Yasumi hadn't appeared yet.

"Satori."

Satori looked up to see Asou's clouded face. "Asou?"

"Are you worried about Iizuka?" Asou asked in a low voice.

Satori stiffened again, and Asou frowned at him.

"That's all over. It happened in the past and there's nothing between us now. Trust me." Asou's voice grew more vehement.

Satori nodded, laughing. "Yeah, I know. You told me that before."

Five days had passed since the incident with Iizuka, but Satori hadn't told Asou about it. He figured it would be better to stay silent, than to make Asou worry.

But the truth was, Satori didn't want to mention Iizuka. If they talked about Iizuka again, he'd feel that ugly jealousy. That would bring home just how strong his love for Asou was, and he'd start worrying all over again.

Satori could stop talking about Iizuka, but that wouldn't erase the fear he felt, or get the things Iizuka had said out of his head. And Satori's unease concerning his overwhelming passion for Asou and being together forever were just as bad as ever. If anything, his fears only grew.

What would Satori do if Asou left him? If Asou hated him? If Asou chose someone else? What would happen to him? Satori couldn't think about anything else. He couldn't eat or sleep. He freaked out now when anyone touched him, even Asou.

Asou must have realized it, because even though they had so much free time, he hadn't once tried to make love to Satori. Asou would never force him. He always put Satori's feelings first.

On one hand, it made Satori happy, but on the other hand, it made him impatient. Even if Asou had to force him, Satori might be cured if Asou made love to him. His unease might disappear.

"Are you worried about something?" Asou asked, reaching out to touch Satori's hair again.

Just then, a group of young people came to a stop in front of them. They spoke up one by one:

"Hey, it's Naotaka!"

"Oh yeah! Long time no see!"

"You waiting for someone?"

The group was made of two girls and three guys—including

Iizuka. Satori stiffened. The gaudily attired group surrounded Satori and Asou.

"Now that you're in college, you never get back to us when we invite you to hang out. We were worried about you!"

"It's no fun without you, Naotaka."

"We're on our way to Junko's now. Come with us!"

Satori stepped back instinctively, but Asou stepped forward to shield him.

"I'm not gonna hang with you guys anymore. I told you that already. I'm meeting someone here, so get lost," he said coldly.

The group groaned unhappily.

"Don't say that!"

"The guy with you can come, too!"

"He's cute! Totally my type!"

"Ooh! Me too! He's pretty!"

Satori ducked to avoid the arms that reached out to grope him.

"I'm not hanging out with you. How many times do I have to say it?" Asou said angrily.

Iizuka had been silent the whole time, but then he spoke up: "Okada-san might want to, even if you don't. You seem to have primed him pretty well."

Satori blanched at the sound of Iizuka's taunting voice. He wanted to say something back, but his throat was burning so badly that he couldn't speak. He was scared. Not just of Iizuka, but of his friends, too. This new fear worked off the unease that he'd been feeling all day, serving only to deepen it. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and his feet felt glued to the spot. Satori was so scared, he couldn't move. He couldn't breathe.

"Iizuka, did you bring these guys here?" Asou glared at Iizuka, still shielding Satori behind him.

"Don't insult me. How would I know that you were here?" Iizuka asked with a smile, refusing to take the bait.

"What then? I've told you a thousand times: I'm not gonna

fool around with you anymore.”

“Yeah, but you fool around with Okada-san.”

“We’re not just fooling around,” Asou hissed.

The other four looked at each other in surprise.

“I don’t ‘fool around’ anymore. I don’t need to. I don’t like it,”

Asou said sharply.

Satori saw Iizuka’s face flush and twist up in anger. It wasn’t the frivolous expression he’d worn when Satori had met him, or the careless, knowing expression he’d worn when he’d assaulted Satori. His face was transformed by fierce emotion.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? The first time we slept together, you told me that you’d never fall in love. All you needed was a warm body.” Iizuka’s raised voice held hatred and jealousy—but also sorrow. “What’s so good about *him*? Who cares if he’s hot? He’s so straight-laced, he won’t even do anything! Why choose him?!” Iizuka yelled.

“He can choose whoever he wants.”

It wasn’t Asou who answered, but the person who had come to stand behind him.

Everyone turned to see Yasumi Takahashi. She wore her hair in a light brown bob which suited her doll-like face perfectly. She was dressed casually in a body-hugging tank top, jeans, and sneakers—but she was so beautiful that everyone around them paused to look at her.

“I can’t believe you’re talking about this in the middle of the street. I almost pretended that I didn’t know you.”

“Yasumi-senpai...” Iizuka had been staring at her in shock, but now, he looked down, embarrassed.

Yasumi glared at him, her eyebrows drawn together. “Shunpei, how many times do I have to tell you that people change? No one stays the same forever. Naotaka changed. You’ve changed, too. I told you that.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Yeah, but’ nothing. You’re as much to blame as Naotaka. If

you’re really in love with him, you should have told him two years ago when he said he was going to stop fooling around. You’ve had two years to tell him, but you’ve just been sleeping around. And *now* you start complaining? You need to start thinking with your brain, not your dick,” Yasumi said shortly.

Iizuka was trembling, biting his lip. Yasumi’s sudden appearance stole his thunder. Yasumi looked at him, gave a small sigh, and then turned her glare at Iizuka’s friends. Their confidence was wavering.

“I’m the one they were waiting for. We made these plans two weeks ago, so could you guys get lost?” Yasumi was small, but she had a black belt in karate and kung fu. When crossed, she could be as tough as any man.

Iizuka was still staring at the ground. Without a word, he turned away and his friends ran after him.

“Hey, wait up!”

“Iizuka!”

Satori heard Asou give a sigh of relief, and realized that his lover was shaking. The image of Iizuka’s jealous, angry face flashed in his head. Satori had no experience in love, so he’d never seen the malice that came from jealousy. The jealousy he’d seen had really frightened him. He could hear Iizuka’s voice, full of hatred, echoing in his head: “*What’s so good about him? Who cares if he’s hot? He’s so straight-laced, he won’t do anything! Why’d you choose him?!* ”

It scared Satori.

Is that what jealousy does to people?

“Seriously...” Yasumi muttered, staring after the kids, her hands on her hips. She spun around and glared at Asou. “You are such a dumbass! Do you really want me to kick your butt that badly?!”

“Thanks for helping us out, Yasumi,” Asou said, mortification in his voice.

Yasumi raised an eyebrow. “How many times do I have to tell you not to call me by my first name?! Not to mention the fact that

this is not the time to go around thanking me, you idiot!”

Satori heard their conversation as if he were standing far away. Everything sounded muffled, like there was cotton in his ears. All he could hear was Iizuka's rage-filled voice echoing in his head.

“You told me that you'd never fall in love. All you needed was a warm body! He won't do anything! Why choose him?!”

Satori clapped his hands over his ears, sinking to the ground. But he couldn't escape Iizuka's voice, so full of jealousy and malice. His chest hurt. He couldn't breathe. He was scared. He was so scared, he couldn't move.

“Satori?” Asou knelt down and shook him by the shoulders. Satori's body jerked forward. Without thinking, he pushed Asou's hands away.

“Satori...” Asou lifted his hands off in surprise.

“Sorry,” Satori whispered. “Sorry...I'm going home...”

Satori turned away from Asou and managed to stand up. He ran, without turning back. He ran as hard and as fast as he could, stumbling a few times. He just wanted to get away from the terror he felt.

“Satori!”

He heard Asou calling him, but he couldn't stop.

Satori sat on the floor of his room, dazed, and looked out the window. A cool breeze blew in from outside. It was almost dusk, and the temperature had dropped a little. His confusion had subsided, and his fear had faded. He could finally think straight again.

Now that he had calmed down, he felt embarrassed.

What possessed me to run away like that? To push Asou's hand away?

Asou was the only one who could ease his lingering fear. And yet, Satori had pushed him away.



I'm such an idiot. What the heck is wrong with me?

He despaired. When he'd run away, Asou hadn't run after him.

Satori laughed, and thought, *not only am I a coward, but I'm selfish too.*

He knew that if Asou had come after him, he would have pushed Asou away again, but he still felt upset that Asou hadn't even tried. The thought of Asou making love to him scared him, but he still wondered why Asou wouldn't initiate anything.

I feel like falling in love with Asou has turned me into a stupid, nasty person.

He sighed and then the doorbell rang. He looked up, startled by the sound.

It could be Asou. What should I do if it is Asou? What can I say?

"Satori-kun?" It was Yasumi's voice.

One part of Satori felt relieved, but another part of him was disappointed that Asou hadn't come, after all. His chest ached, and he bit his lip. He wanted to see Asou right away. He wanted to hear Asou's voice. He wanted Asou to be with him, to hold him. And yet, he didn't want to see Asou. He was *afraid* to see him. His contradictory thoughts gave him pause. How could he be such a rational person, and yet be so emotional about everything?

"Satori-kun, are you there?" Yasumi called carefully.

Satori stood quickly. "Yeah. I'll be right there!"

After all, he had made a promise to see Yasumi today. He'd run without even saying hello to her; he'd completely ditched them both, so he had to apologize. Satori took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Hi!" Yasumi stuck her head in. There was no trace of anger on her doll-like face.

"Yasumi-san, about this afternoon, I..."

"Oh, don't worry about it. Are you feeling a little better now?"

Yasumi asked, sounding worried.

Satori nodded vaguely. Yasumi didn't ask why he'd been so upset, and he could tell that it was her way of being polite.

"I came by because I have something I need to ask you. Is this a good time?" Yasumi tilted her head a little, and Satori nodded after a moment's hesitation. She'd come all the way to see him; he couldn't just kick her out.

"Please come in. Excuse the mess."

"Oh, it's all right; I won't stay long. You don't have to be so formal, okay? We're the same age, after all!" Yasumi laughed wickedly and leaned against the wall of the entryway.

"If you'd prefer," he agreed with a smile.

Yasumi watched him intently. Her gaze was searching and he couldn't meet her eyes.

"What is it?" Satori asked.

"Nothing—sorry. I was just thinking...I understand why Naotaka chose you."

"Huh?" That was the last thing Satori had expected her to say.

Yasumi looked him up and down. "He's never had someone like you around. Someone who thinks about things rationally, whose feelings don't waver, and who's honest and down to Earth. I bet you've never even thought about playing with someone just for fun, have you?" Yasumi teased.

Satori was at a loss for words. "No, But I feel like I'm playing with him, anyway. And I'm not honest; I'm just a coward."

I'm not good enough for Asou. The thought sent a sharp pain through Satori's heart, and he bowed his head.

But Yasumi said shortly: "Who cares if you're a coward? That's probably a good thing, as Naotaka is pretty thick, and he tends to run into problems because of it."

Satori stared at her with wide eyes.

Yasumi looked back at him, her own eyes looking at him gently. "Besides, Naotaka loves you just the way you are. So it's okay," she said softly.

"But..." Satori whispered faintly. He couldn't go on.

But Asou doesn't know. He doesn't know I'm such a coward, or how narrow-minded I am, or how jealous I get.

The reason that Iizuka's jealousy scared Satori so much was that it had forced him to realize that he had similar feelings. If Asou ever grew to hate him, Satori would be the same way. That realization terrified him.

It shocked him so much when Iizuka had called him too serious and said he had no good qualities. It was more than Iizuka's insults; it was because Satori realized he was being a hypocrite and had an unfair opinion of Iizuka.

At first, Satori had thought Iizuka was cool. Maybe a little forceful, but cheerful and friendly. But after he found out about Iizuka's past with Asou, Satori had begun to think of Iizuka as easy, insensitive, and mean. Of course, Satori's opinion of Iizuka had really been influenced by the fact that Iizuka forced himself on Satori. But jealousy had also been a factor in that decision.

I'm no different from Iizuka, really.

The only difference between Satori and Iizuka was that Iizuka had said his opinion out loud—and Satori hadn't.

Satori remembered what he'd first thought of Yasumi, who was standing in front of him now. When he'd thought that Yasumi was Asou's girlfriend, he'd hated her. He'd thought she was selfish and arrogant to be with Asou when she had a husband. He'd been so scared that Asou would hate him, he'd jumped to conclusions without even finding out the truth.

I'm such a coward. If Asou knew what I'm really like, he'd hate me.

"He ran after you, you know," Yasumi said softly.

Satori looked at her, startled.

"It's true," she insisted.

Suddenly, he remembered hearing Asou call his name right after he'd started running. Asou had called out to Satori to stop, and Satori had just kept running. He realized that the voice has been

tinged with impatience.

"But some of the kids that had been with Shunpei stuck around to watch, and they grabbed him. I guess they knew how Shunpei felt, because they surrounded Naotaka and said they wouldn't let him go until he'd talked to Shunpei."

Satori's heart flip-flopped at the name "Shunpei."

Yasumi ran her fingers through her short hair, frowning. "I should have scared those kids off and let Naotaka go, but I thought that was going a little far." She chuckled, and Satori nodded.

He and Asou weren't children. They needed to figure problems out on their own. Yasumi shouldn't even be telling him what had happened after he'd run away.

"Also, about Shunpei..."

Satori felt himself tremble again at the name. He couldn't tell if Yasumi had noticed.

She continued, "Things are kind of difficult at home for him. Naotaka was the one person he felt that he could go to. I don't think he took it seriously when Naotaka said he didn't want to see him anymore. Naotaka's the one who caused the trouble, and he needs to sort that out. But he'll come see you when he's done talking to Shunpei. I think you should ask for his side of the story, okay?" Yasumi smiled at him and Satori nodded.

Yasumi didn't need to be doing this. There was no reason for her to come here and tell him about Iizuka. She was just being nice.

I'm such a coward and so mean that I'm even causing trouble for her, Satori thought, full of remorse.

"I'm sorry about today, Yasumi-san. Thank you," he apologized.

Yasumi stared at him, eyes wide, and after a while, she hummed. "I understand how Naotaka feels. Satori-kun, you have such a sexy aura about you, but it's totally natural. You're so cute."

Satori peered at her suspiciously. He couldn't figure out what she meant by that.

Yasumi gave a mischievous laugh. "You know, Satori-kun, I think this is the first time Naotaka has really fallen in love," she said slowly, like speaking to a small child.

She crossed her arms and looked sideways at Satori, a mannish gesture that was at odds with her feminine beauty. "Naotaka has never fallen for someone—or had to work to get them to notice him before. He'd always been with people who approached him, so he didn't know what to do with someone who wasn't already interested. That's why he ended up in unrequited love for two years. He *still* doesn't know when to step up and when to step down. He keeps pushing once he's pushed, and when he retreats, he keeps retreating. I get irritated just watching it."

Unrequited love for two years. Asou had said that too.

Asou said he had fallen in love with Satori at first sight, at Freshman Orientation, and hadn't been able to take his eyes off Satori since. Satori was happy to hear it from someone other than Asou—but it also made his heart ache.

Asou had said that he loved Satori's eyes. That he wanted to see those eyes gazing at him. Satori bit his lip. So what if his eyes were a little different than other peoples'? What did that mean?

"It's like the two of you are both so clumsy about it all. Neither of you know what you're doing. It's so cute, like this is your first love."

Yasumi chuckled, and Satori felt himself blush. He bent his head, unable to think of anything to say. After all, Asou really *was* Satori's first love.

By the time Satori had realized how he felt, he was so in love with Asou, he wanted to be with the man all the time. He'd thought that as long as Asou loved him, that was all he needed. As long as Asou was with him, he figured he'd be happy. So when he'd realized that Asou did love him back, Satori had been happier than he'd ever been.

But since then, Satori saw all these parts of himself he didn't like. The cowardly part that was afraid of what Asou gave him. The

narrow-minded part that couldn't accept. The part that was jealous, even though he knew jealousy was horrible. The part that couldn't hold back his feelings for Asou. The greedy part that wanted every inch of Asou for himself.

It all scared him.

And at the same time, it worried him that he couldn't imagine his future with Asou. When Iizuka had called Satori out on his relationship with Asou, Satori had been scared of others knowing how he felt.

Being with the one I love doesn't mean everything is perfect. Being with the one I love can bring out the worst sides of me. And it makes me worry more than ever.

"Satori-kun," Yasumi said, her voice serious.

Satori looked up and saw that her expression was just as serious as her voice.

"I'm sure there are things that you can't understand or can't forgive. But all of that is in the past. I'm not saying that it didn't happen, but Naotaka is different now. *You* changed him. So please don't hate him because of what happened."

"I could never hate him..." Satori looked down. Right before he'd left, Satori had pushed Asou's hand away. No wonder Yasumi had gotten the wrong idea.

But the reason Satori hadn't wanted Asou to touch him wasn't because he hated Asou. It was what Iizuka had done to him, and having Iizuka point out the worst parts of his character. All that had set him off and he'd behaved like a coward.

"I don't hate him." Satori's heart ached, and he clutched at the front of his shirt. "I could never hate him." A twinge went through his heart as he whispered it.

I love him, he thought. I love Asou.

That was the one thing he was certain of. He felt his eyes sting, but he held back his tears.

Then the phone next to the refrigerator rang. Asou's face sprang to mind, but he knew that it couldn't be Asou. Asou

would've called his cell phone. He knew that, but he couldn't help wondering.

He laughed a little. "Excuse me," he told Yasumi and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Oh, Satori-kun? It's Sanae."

Sanae was his sister-in-law. With an effort, Satori made his voice sound cheerful: "Oh, hello!"

"Is Natsuki over there?"

"My brother? No. Why?"

Satori could hear Sanae sigh. Sanae had been in high school with his older brother, and she'd been in a girl gang and was pretty tough. It was unusual for her to sigh like that.

"Could you let me know if he comes to see you?"

"Sure. Did something happen?"

"We had a little fight. I was really angry. I'm worried about what he's up to."

It was also unusual for her to be so evasive. His sister-in-law really knew how to handle his brother. Maybe it helped that she was older, but she always had him eating out of the palm of her hand.

"All right. I'll give you a call if he shows up."

"Thank you; sorry about this," his sister-in-law said and hung up.

They seem so close, but even those two fight sometimes... Satori thought absentmindedly.

They were happily married with kids, and they still fought. Maybe they felt uneasy sometimes, because they were so happy.

Satori gasped. *A fight! Asou and I have never gotten into a fight before.*

He had been too scared of the uneasiness and the fear—so scared that he'd hidden his true thoughts. It would be impossible to have a fight that way.

"Well, I'm off then," Yasumi said.

Satori turned to see that Yasumi already had her hand on the doorknob.

He made a quick bow. "Thank you so much for taking the time to come."

"Hey. I told you not to stand on ceremony with me." Yasumi laughed, and Satori laughed with her.

"Sorry. Um, I'll walk you out."

"Oh, don't worry about it. It's still light out... and you seem to have a visitor, anyway," Yasumi said, throwing the door open.

For a moment, Satori was sure it would be Asou, but the figure standing at the door was his brother, Natsuki. He seemed a little shocked to see such a beautiful girl coming out of his little brother's room.

"Aniki..." Satori couldn't help sighing.

I'm such an idiot. If I want to see Asou so badly, why the heck did I push him away?

"Oh, is this your big brother? Nice to meet you," Yasumi said, smiling.

She nodded to Natsuki, who stuttered: "He-hello."

"Well then, it was nice seeing you." Yasumi waved to Satori and set off.

Natsuki stared after her, dumbfounded. He had come on his motorcycle wearing jeans and a sweatshirt and carrying his helmet.

"Aniki, come in," Satori said, and Natsuki turned, his mouth hanging open. His heavy-lidded eyes, which resembled Satori's, were wide.

"Sanae called," Satori said, cutting off whatever his brother was about to say. "Just so you know, that woman is not my girlfriend."

His brother glared at him suspiciously. He hadn't taken Satori's invitation to come in; instead, he leaned against the open door, his helmet in his hand. Satori stood in the entry way, facing his brother.

"You liar. You totally sighed when you saw me."

"She really isn't. She's married, anyway," Satori said with another sigh.

Natsuki raised a disbelieving eyebrow. The man had a round face, and he and Satori looked very much alike. But they were different; while his brother was cheerful, Satori had always been the quieter of the two. The difficult older brother, and the easygoing younger brother. Both their family and the neighbors thought of Satori as much more level-headed than Natsuki.

Maybe those opinions had had an effect on their relationship, but Satori didn't have many memories of his brother ever covering for him or being especially nice to him. Aside from when they were very young, they'd never spent much time together. It wasn't that they didn't get along, they just weren't especially close.

"That girl is married? Really?"

"Really. When have I ever lied to you about something like this?"

"That's true, but..." His brother ran an awkward hand through his short hair.

Silence reigned.

If I was more like my brother, I wouldn't worry so much... Satori thought. He would have been able to think more positively about his relationship with Asou.

"Satori," his brother said suddenly, and Satori blinked.

No matter who Satori was with, his head was always full of Asou. That was how much Satori loved him. He'd already forgotten about the fight his brother and his sister-in-law were having. "What?"

"Sorry," his brother said simply.

Satori frowned. "I'm not the one you should be apologizing to. You need to apologize to Sanae."

"No, I need to apologize to *you*."

"For what?"

His brother scratched the tip of his nose and hummed. It was a childish gesture. Although he was the father of three, he was only twenty years old.

The kids are really growing into their own personalities,

lately. Mai has a real temper. Tsubasa is always moving. And Hikaru is the quiet one."

Satori wondered what all this had to do with him and waited, while his brother hummed again. "It's different when Mom and Dad are helping out, but when it's just Sanae and I, I always find myself watching Mai and Tsubasa. Hikaru doesn't cry or fuss, so I deal with him last. Of course, I think Hikaru wants our attention just as much as Mai and Tsubasa, but he's so quiet that he gets overwhelmed by them and can't let us know how he feels." His brother sighed and turned back to Satori. "To tell the truth, Satori...you were so quiet and serious and all the adults loved you...so I...never really liked you much for it. I think I was jealous because you could get away with more by being so straight-laced than I ever could by rebelling."

Satori stared. He was the one who had been jealous. What did he have for his brother to envy?

"Jealous of what?" he asked quickly, still shocked.

Natsuki laughed a little. "Mom and Dad were always telling me to be more like you. I always wished you were more troublesome, like me, so I wouldn't have to hear that all the time."

"No way..."

It was a real shock. He'd never imagined his brother felt that way. His brother had always been able to do all sorts of things he couldn't do, so Satori had always thought Natsuki didn't even spare a thought for him.

"Don't get the wrong idea, though. I don't feel like that now. I was such a dumbass back then. I'm sure you had all kinds of things you wanted to do, and things you wanted to rebel against. But I was always getting into trouble and failing my exams, so Mom and Dad were worried about me. But you're so quiet, you never said anything. Am I wrong?"

Natsuki watched Satori closely, more intensely and soberly than Satori was used to seeing him.

Satori thought about it, and then he said, "I...I think you're wrong. It's true that I was jealous because you were allowed to do

what I couldn't, but...that didn't have anything to do with my being serious. I'm not serious. I'm just a narrow-minded coward. You don't need to apologize for anything."

At this self-deprecating speech, his brother's mouth twisted angrily. "Don't say things like that, you dumbass. You're not a coward, and you're not narrow-minded. Or, no more than anyone else. Also, I'm older than you! So if I apologize, you should just forgive me."

Satori stared, taken aback. He couldn't tell if Natsuki was truly angry or trying to cheer him up. His brother usually spoke so carelessly to him. Finally, Natsuki's expression faltered and he scratched the back of his head.

"Watching Hikaru made me think of you. So I told Sanae that she should take care of Hikaru first sometimes, and then she asked why she should leave Mai crying to take care of Hikaru when he *wasn't* crying. And suddenly we weren't talking about the kids anymore, but about how I was drinking too much with the guys from work or how much it costs to keep my bike...and then we started fighting."

Satori felt more shocked than ever. He thought that it must be really serious for his brother and Sanae to get into a fight. But it turned out they were fighting about things that seemed unimportant to Satori.

Natsuki glared at Satori. "You must be thinking we're really stupid to make such a big deal out of such little things, right?"

Satori rushed to say, "No, of course not!"

His brother sighed. "Every-day life is just a collection of little things. I'm sure the stress from raising kids has gotten to Sanae, and it was my fault for not realizing that. I'm going to go home and apologize."

His brother stood up, and Satori laughed. It struck him as funny that his brother was talking about his own issues after all this time. It also made him happy. He was glad his brother had come to talk to him.



"If you knew it was your fault, you should have just apologized already."

"I was just so pissed; I couldn't apologize right away."

"But if you're going to apologize anyway, what difference does it make?"

"I told you, I was pissed. I calmed down on the way here. At the time, I didn't think I was wrong at all."

"Oh, that's not good. I'm gonna tell Sanae you said that."

They chatted while his brother got his sneakers on, and Satori showed his brother to the door.

A silver bike stood in front of the apartment, shining in the sunset. In college, his brother had driven a large motor bike, but when he got married, he'd traded it in for a standard. His selfish brother now saw himself as the pillar of his family, and he was changing his lifestyle and his values accordingly. But he wasn't being forced to; he was doing it in order to protect and nurture the ones that were most important to him.

His brother was so amazing.

Satori wasn't jealous, he was just impressed.

I hope I can be like him.

"Hey, Satori," Natsuki called, as he sat on his bike and put on his helmet.

"What?"

"Was Sanae pissed?"

"Totally."

His brother groaned as he started the engine, so Satori added: "She was also really worried, so get yourself home."

His brother gazed at Satori through his helmet, looking startled. Then he grinned, and the engine roared to life. "See ya."

"Take care!" Satori yelled over the noise of the bike.

Natsuki nodded and rode away while Satori waved until he disappeared from sight.

Suddenly, he was dying to see Asou. He wanted to go home to Asou—the way that his brother was going home to Sanae. He loved

Asou. Sure, he was scared. He was so scared that he didn't know what to do, but he still loved Asou.

Asou was so precious to him. He was the only one. It wasn't a question of forgiving or not forgiving. He just loved Asou. He was more important than anything else.

Satori understood that now.

He turned to face the street, bathed in the orange light of the setting sun. His familiar apartment. The cookie-cutter houses built during the Bubble Economy. The rusted fence surrounding the park. And the pitted asphalt of the road.

It was the road that Asou always took to Satori's apartment, but Asou was nowhere to be found. The road was empty, save for a group of children playing, trying to make the most of the end of the day.

"Asou..." As Satori called his boyfriend's name, his heart throbbed and his eyes filled with tears.

Yasumi had assured him that Asou would come right over as soon as he'd patched things up with Iizuka. More than three hours had passed since the incident at the fountain.

Satori could feel a dark uneasiness building inside him.

What's happened to Asou? He should have come by already.

He laughed bitterly to himself. *I want him to come here. I want him to hold me. I want him to kiss me. I want him to be here with me. Want, want, want—that's all I ever think about.*

Looking back, Satori realized that he'd always been the submissive one in his relationship with Asou. The first time they'd made love, it had started with a kiss from Asou—and it was Asou who frequently came to Satori's place.

Satori never did anything. The only thing he'd ever done first was tell Asou how he felt, but he'd been goaded into that by his jealousy of Yasumi. Satori realized that he had a constant need to protect himself, and it had become his weakness.

No matter what his brother thought, making sure he was always protected was a selfish thing to do, and it made him a

coward. It didn't give him an excuse to wait any longer. He couldn't just sit there, doing nothing, simply because he felt anxious.

He wanted to see Asou. Hold him. Kiss him. Be near him. That was how much he loved Asou. No matter how much those feelings scared him, no matter how uneasy they made him, they were all he had. They were everything.

That's what he'd learned.

So he would go see Asou—to make Asou his.

The second he made his decision, Satori felt strength pouring through him. He couldn't ride a motorbike like his brother, but he could walk to where he wanted to go. The love he had in his heart for Asou was stronger than anything. Satori turned and ran as fast as he could up to his apartment. He had to call Asou and go to him.

It was already getting dark by the time he reached the station where they had met Yasumi. Satori left the platform quickly and made his way through the crowd to the turnstile. After his brother had left, he'd called Asou's cell phone, but Asou's phone was turned off. He'd tried calling Asou's apartment, but he'd gotten the answering machine.

This was the first time he hadn't been able to reach Asou.

Asou wouldn't have gone back to Iizuka, would he?

Satori had hung up impatiently and called Yasumi, who told him that she hadn't heard from Asou either. When Satori confessed that he couldn't reach Asou, Yasumi had told him the address of the café where Asou and Iizuka had gone to talk, and just in case, the names and addresses of the clubs and pool halls the two had frequented in high school.

"Do you want me to help you look?" Yasumi had asked.

"Thanks, but I'll be fine," Satori had answered.

There was silence for a moment. Yasumi had said she was

sorry and for Satori to be careful. He'd thanked her and hung up.

I'm the one who should be apologizing, Satori had thought.

This was a problem between Asou and himself. Yasumi shouldn't feel like she needed to help them. If only he had been paying closer attention.

First, Satori went to Asou's apartment. By now the doorman knew Satori, but he shook his head when Satori asked if he'd seen Asou. Satori thought about waiting for Asou to come home, but he was sick of waiting for things. He decided to look in the places Yasumi had mentioned. If he didn't find Asou there, he would come back to the apartment. Asou was sure to be home by then.

On the train, Satori found himself searching the crowds in the station, hoping to see Asou.

There are so many people here; why isn't Asou among them? Why can't I find the one person I'm looking for?

An unspeakable anxiety coursed through him.

Yasumi had said that Iizuka was Asou's former hook up. Asou himself had said that it was all in the past—that his heart had never been in it. There was no way that Asou could be doing something with Iizuka. But then, why hadn't Asou called him? Why was his phone turned off? Why hadn't he gone home yet?

Asou was such a nice guy. Iizuka could have tricked him somehow. After all, Iizuka had been in love with Asou far longer than Satori had.

Satori's thoughts grew darker by the minute. Satori pressed his lips together, and then he realized that he was staring at the ground.

No! I can't lose my nerve now!

The important thing to do was to find Asou. Satori tilted his head up and went through the turnstile. He stopped outside of the station and took out his phone. There were no icons to indicate a missed call or any new mail. He tried Asou's cell again.

He pressed the phone to his ear and listened to it ring. After several rings, Asou's voicemail picked up. So Satori immediately

called Asou's apartment. Once again, the answering machine picked up.

Satori took a gulp of air and realized that his hands were shaking. As he did so, he felt a sharp pain behind his eyes. He worried his urgency and anxiety would suffocate him.

Why doesn't Asou pick up? Where is he?

"Asou!" he called softly with a shaky voice.

There were dozens of people around him. A group of high school boys were rough housing nearby. A father carried his sleeping child on his shoulders. A group of young women who had just come back from a trip were loaded down with bags of souvenirs. Everyone was mourning the end of the holiday, but regardless of that, they all seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Until now, Satori had always been fine, even in the midst of so much commotion. He hadn't felt a thing. But it was different when Asou wasn't with him. Without Asou, the hustle and bustle around him seemed empty. Satori hated it. It made him feel anxious, like he'd been abandoned in a strange land. It was a loneliness he'd never felt before. A loneliness he could only feel after being with Asou.

The only way to end the loneliness was to find Asou.

I can't stop, Satori thought.

He took a deep breath and scrubbed his eyes with his fist, still clutching his phone. From his pocket, he took out a piece of paper with the names and addresses of two clubs and one pool hall Yasumi had told him about.

Satori had never been to a club or a pool hall before. As a college student, he had gone out at night. But his friends had gone out to cheap bars or karaoke places, not clubs or pool halls. And of course, he'd never gone as a high school student, either.

So he was a little scared about going by himself. But Asou might be there, so he couldn't let his fear get the better of him. Satori took another deep breath, and started walking without hesitation.

He started with the café where Asou had gone to talk to Iizuka,

but the two were nowhere to be seen. Given how many hours had passed since he'd left Asou by the fountain, Satori hadn't expected to find him there. So he continued on to the clubs. He had no luck at the first club, or the second.

Satori was so intent on finding Asou that going into these unfamiliar places didn't even faze him. The young people at the clubs were all dressed in gaudy clothing that Satori would never wear, but for some reason, he wasn't afraid to ask them questions. Perhaps they felt bad for Satori, who was so obviously out of his element, because everyone he asked was really nice, even going so far as to ask the people around them if they had seen Asou or Iizuka.

"I saw Iizuka last night, but I haven't seen him tonight."

"Yeah, me neither."

"Never mind Shunpei; I haven't seen Asou here in *years*. I don't think he comes here anymore. Maybe you should look somewhere else."

Most of the kids in the club seemed to know both Asou and Iizuka, and they all said similar things. Satori thanked them and went on his way.

Outside of the dimly lit club, the sky was already dark, but the streets glittered with neon lights. The light breeze of the afternoon had grown stronger, whipping at Satori's cheeks mercilessly.

Satori forced himself to stop shivering and looked at his watch.

It's only seven-thirty. The night's barely even begun.

He tried Asou's cell again, just in case, but no one picked up. Asou didn't pick up at the apartment either; it just kept going to the answering machine.

Satori was heading toward Escualo, the pool hall that Yasumi had mentioned, when he was struck by a horrible thought: *Iizuka said he lived near Satori. What if Asou is at Iizuka's apartment? If Asou is at Iizuka's apartment, there's no way for me to reach him.*

Iizuka had just started college in April; even Yasumi wouldn't

know his new address.

What if...what if Asou had chosen Iizuka?

What would Satori do? What would happen to him? Would he let Asou go? *Could* he let Asou go? Could he pretend he'd never loved Asou?

His heart ached sharply and his mounting anxiety made his breathing erratic. It was his love for Asou that made him so worried.

Impossible. No way I can do that. No way I'd ever give Asou up. Even if he doesn't choose me, I'm still in love with him.

He blinked up at the neon lights of the pool hall. The green letters spelled out "Escualo." Suddenly, the letters blurred together, and he laughed bitterly to himself. This wasn't the time to start crying.

I don't even know if Asou's chosen Iizuka. I can't cry yet. I still have things I need to do.

Satori opened the door slowly. A low voice called out "Welcome!"

The club had been blaring loud music, but the bar area was strangely quiet. He could hear the click of the cues hitting the balls on the pool tables that lined the room.

This place seemed to be geared more toward adults than the clubs had been. All the furnishings—from the pool tables to the counter—were tasteful and well-made.

Come to think of it, Yasumi said that the owner of the bar is a friend of Asou's uncle.

Satori looked around the well-lit bar and suddenly his eyes widened and his heart thumped loudly. Sitting at the farthest corner of the counter was Iizuka. He was hunched in on himself, his arms crossed, so Satori couldn't see his face, but he recognized the slender body and brightly dyed hair. Iizuka was alone.

Satori breathed a sigh of relief. All the tension left his body. Asou wasn't with Iizuka. He was so glad. It had all been his imagination. But then, his suspicions returned with a vengeance. He



couldn't breathe easy just because Asou wasn't here with Iizuka. He might have just gotten up from his seat for a minute.

And if Asou isn't with Iizuka, then where the hell is he?

Satori stood there, staring, and finally Iizuka lifted his head as if he felt Satori's eyes on him.

Iizuka's eyes widened then narrowed angrily, and he looked away.

Before he realized what he was doing, Satori had started walking toward Iizuka. Iizuka was the only person who might know where Asou was right now. He couldn't afford to hesitate.

"What do you want?" Iizuka asked brusquely, before Satori had a chance to speak. He still wasn't looking at Satori. He obviously wasn't happy that Satori was there. But Satori ignored it. He didn't stop walking until he was next to Iizuka.

"Sorry to bother you, but I need to ask you something." The words tripped easily off his tongue; he'd said the same spiel dozens of times at the clubs. "Do you know where Asou is?"

Iizuka finally looked up at Satori, a suspicious frown on his face. "Didn't he go to your place?"

"No. That's why I'm looking for him. Do you have any idea where he could be?"

Iizuka looked away again, his gaze falling to the glass on the counter in front of him. He said in a mocking voice, "Maybe he's at a club? He goes to a lot of the clubs around here."

"I came here because he wasn't at any of those. Any other ideas? Or...are you meeting him here?" Satori could hear his voice falter.

Iizuka must have heard it too, because he turned back to Satori, his eyes cold and sadistic. "What would you do if I was? If I told you that once I'd explained how I've been in love with him since high school, Naotaka said he felt the same way? What if I told you he said he didn't care about you anymore?"

Iizuka's words were like darts, piercing Satori's heart. He clenched his teeth. Iizuka was putting into words all the things that

had been running through Satori's head on his way here.

What if Asou hates me? If Asou leaves me?

But Satori knew his answer. He was in love with Asou. That was all. That was everything.

"Then...I'd wait here for Asou with you. And when Asou showed up, I'd tell him that even if he hated me, I still love him," Satori said slowly, his voice trembling.

Iizuka snorted. "It doesn't matter how much you love him. He's in love with me."

"I'd still tell him," Satori answered immediately.

Iizuka stared at him, eyes wide and shocked.

"Because even if he hates me, I'm still in love with him," Satori went on. Because the love that burned inside him was the real thing. He wouldn't give it up for anyone.

"Even if there were people around? Like right now?" Iizuka indicated the other side of the bar with a nod of his chin. A little way off, a middle-aged bartender was wiping glasses in silence. "I'm pretty sure he's listening to our conversation. Don't you care? You know, I could tell Asou I loved him in the middle of the street. I doubt you could do that."

"I could," Satori said. He wasn't lying. He knew he could say it. He'd spent the last few hours searching frantically for Asou to no avail. No one had seen Asou. Satori had felt more than just fear and worry. He'd felt his love for Asou grow stronger than ever. Satori didn't care what anyone said. He loved Asou so deeply that he had no shame, no pride.

"I could say it. I'll say it right now. I'll scream it, if you want me to."

Satori took a deep breath, and Iizuka stood up quickly. "Whoa! Don't scream, you dumbass!"

"Why not?" Satori asked, letting his breath out slowly.

"Why not?" Iizuka whispered, sounding frustrated. He stuck his tongue out. Satori gazed at him, and Iizuka glared back. "I thought I was the only one who could understand Naotaka," Iizuka spat out,

sitting heavily on his stool. "Both Naotaka and I were abandoned by our parents. I thought the same way Naotaka did. That I'd never fall in love—that I just needed a warm body. I couldn't trust in my parents' love, so how could I ever trust anyone else's? Naotaka said the same things, and it made me feel close to him. I thought he was the only one who understood me, and that I was the only one who understood him." Iizuka fell silent and glanced over at Satori. "You don't understand that—do you, Okada-san? You look like you were raised in a normal, happy home."

Satori didn't say anything. He didn't know what kind of house Asou had grown up in. He realized that while he'd heard Asou talk about his uncle and Yasumi, he'd never heard Asou talk about his parents.

Abandoned by their parents...

Satori couldn't wrap his mind around that idea. Despite any issues he might have with his brother, Satori had been raised in a loving household. Whatever their differences, Satori knew that his brother loved him. After all, he had driven all the way over just to come see Satori today. But Satori really didn't understand what Iizuka was talking about, and he felt like it wouldn't be right to try and imagine. But he did want to know. He wanted to know about Asou. So he waited for Iizuka to continue.

Iizuka began to speak in a low voice. "I didn't think anything of when Naotaka stopped fooling around with me. It wasn't just me; he wasn't having anything to do with any of the guys from high school, so I just figured he was getting around on campus. In high school, he was always dropping people after he got tired of them, so I figured that he'd come back, once he got bored of everyone at college. I was sure he'd come back because I was the only one who understood him."

Iizuka fell silent. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the counter. As he moved, the lights hit his bright hair, which glinted sharply. Satori squinted at the brightness, but didn't take his eyes off Iizuka.

"But a year passed, and then another, and Naotaka never relented. He wouldn't give me the time of day. He told me not to call and said he didn't want to fool around anymore," Iizuka murmured in a low voice, as if to himself. He sighed, a dark shadow falling over his fine profile. "So I started to think it was weird. And when I got to college, you were with him."

Iizuka glared at Satori, who gulped.

That's right. I was always with Asou. Going to school, in class, during free time, at lunch, on the way home, and even at home. Satori was always with Asou. And Iizuka had seen all that.

"Naotaka seemed so happy when he was with you. When I first saw him, I didn't recognize him. I'd never seen Naotaka like that. And then today...he said you were the first person he'd ever fallen in love with, and he wanted to spend his life with you. He said that you were the only one for him, so he didn't care what happened to him, he just didn't want you getting hurt. He was so serious, I thought he'd start crying."

Iizuka fell silent. Satori watched the young man clench his fists on the counter so tightly that his knuckles turned white. That told Satori how Iizuka really felt.

Iizuka really is in love with Asou... Satori realized, and pain shot through him.

Iizuka laughed sharply. "For the first time in his life. What a laugh. He's not Naotaka anymore. I take it all back. You come here like an idiot, talking about screaming how much you love him—you and he deserve each other."

Iizuka spoke as if he was just joking around, but it was painfully obvious to Satori that Iizuka was bluffing. He could still hear the desperation in Iizuka's voice when he'd asked why Asou had chosen someone like Satori. That voice had been full of hatred and jealousy and unspeakable sorrow. That voice was Iizuka's true feelings.

Satori bit his lip. Asou was the only one for him, the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. The joy those words

brought was so great, he was almost shaking with happiness. But for Iizuka, those words must have been mercilessly cruel.

Sometime in the future, Satori might feel the same pain Iizuka felt now. If that happened, he doubted he could bluff. He doubted he could have talked to the new person Asou would be seeing. The only thing he would be able to do was to scream and cry. It was a terrifying thought.

But, Satori thought, I still love Asou.

He couldn't stop loving Asou.

"So no, I'm not waiting here for Naotaka. You might wanna go look for him somewhere else," Iizuka said coolly.

Satori nodded. He went to say thanks and then stopped. This wasn't the time to thank Iizuka.

"I'm off, then. Sorry to bother you." With that, Satori left.

Satori knew where he would go. To Asou's apartment. He just wanted to see Asou's face, to hear his voice. He headed for the door without looking back, thinking only of being reconnected with Asou.

As he left the bar, he heard someone say "thank you." It wasn't until he had started running toward the station that he'd realized it had been the bartender.

Satori hurried down the now-familiar street. If he walked straight on this road and then took a right, he'd be at Asou's apartment building. If it were a weekday, this road would be full of businesspeople making their way home, but at the moment, it was empty.

He wanted to run as fast as he could, but he'd been walking all evening and he couldn't get his feet to cooperate anymore.

Where's Asou? he wondered, forcing his tired legs to move. He'd tried calling Asou again once he'd exited the station, but there had been no answer on either his cell or his home phone. *Could he have been in an accident? What if he was sick?* But if that was the case, Yasumi would have called him. He didn't have a clue where Asou was likely to have gone, and it left him feeling miserable.

I really don't know anything about Asou.

He'd never had to search like this for his lover before. He'd never needed to, because Asou had always been there.

I shouldn't have taken that for granted, Satori thought.

Asou had always been so sweet to him, always treated him well, and yet Satori had been scared of feeling too much for him? It was ridiculous. Satori felt miserable, and he was about to cry again. He gritted his teeth to hold back his tears, and turned right under the flickering streetlights. When he did so, he saw a slim figure heading toward him from the opposite direction.

"Asou!" Satori yelled without thinking.

The figure jumped.

The road was dark, with only the light from the streetlamps and neon signs, but Satori could tell that it was Asou. He felt something warm explode inside his heart, making him gasp. The one he'd been searching for was finally right before his eyes. Asou was right there!

"Asou!" Satori yelled again. He took off, forgetting the pain in his feet. He ran to Asou and threw his arms around the man. Asou stepped back a little, but he held Satori tightly.

"Satori?" he said hesitantly.

Satori clung to Asou. He could feel the heat of the man's body through his shirt, reminding him that Asou was here, and that this was real.

"Where...where have you...?" *Where have you been?* he meant to say, but he choked up. He was having trouble breathing, but he didn't know if it was because he'd run so fast, or if he was just so happy to see Asou.

"I...called...but...you didn't...answer...I was so...worried...I went...looking..." Satori said brokenly.

"You okay?" Asou asked quickly. He stroked Satori's back.

Satori was breathing a sigh of relief when Asou took hold of both his shoulders and gently moved him away. Satori looked up at Asou with tear-filled eyes, unable to comprehend this. Asou was

looking down at him with a hurt expression. His frown was deep enough to cause worry lines and his dark eyes looked anxious. Even in the dim light of the street, Satori could clearly see the pain in his face. Satori had never seen Asou look like that, and it shocked him. Asou seemed like a different person from the man who had always looked Satori directly in the eye.

"Asou?"

Asou looked away.

"I thought you didn't want me to touch you," Asou said in a low voice.

Satori gasped. *That's right. I didn't mean to, but the whole time, I've been shrinking from Asou's touch.*

Somehow, in the hours he'd spent searching for Asou, his fear of being touched had disappeared. But, of course, Asou had no way of noticing something that Satori had just figured out himself. After all, just this afternoon Satori had shaken off Asou's hand and run away. Of course Asou thought Satori didn't want to be touched.

"No, no, that's not it. It's not that I didn't want you to touch me..." Satori said hurriedly.

Asou gave a bitter laugh. "I'm the one who made love to you without even asking. It's true that I did stupid things in high school, and I was the one who made you feel uncomfortable today...I was the one who ended up leading Iizuka on like that. You have every right to refuse to let me touch you..."

"No, Asou. It's not that I didn't want you to touch me. I'm okay now. Something happened, that's why I acted so strangely," Satori explained quickly, wishing Asou would look at him.

But Asou cut him off, saying, "All I do is hurt you. I'm no good for you. You must know that."

Asou didn't give Satori a chance to interrupt. When he'd finished talking, he brushed past Satori without warning. He headed toward his apartment, not looking back.

"Asou!" Satori ran after him. "Wait! Wait, Asou. Listen to me!"

But Asou didn't turn around. It stunned Satori a little. Asou always listened carefully to what Satori had to say. Asou never interrupted him or cut him off. No matter how softly Satori spoke, Asou always listened. But now, when Satori was calling out to him frantically, Asou wasn't turning around.

Why? Why?! Why isn't Asou listening?! If he'd only listen, he'd understand everything.

"Asou!"

By the time they'd reached the door of the apartment building, Satori had grabbed Asou's arm, but Asou threw him off.

"After all, you've got someone else to listen to you," Asou muttered. With that, he disappeared into the building, leaving Satori to stare after him in shock. He felt himself grow pale and his heart contract. He could only stand there, his hand still raised.

"Other people to listen to me?" As if he would talk to anyone but Asou. He had no one else. Asou was the only one for him.

Why would Asou say something like that?

Satori felt more confused than ever. This made no sense. He couldn't understand what was happening.

I should go after him, Satori realized, coming back to himself. Satori ran into the apartment building. There must have been some kind of misunderstanding, and it could only be because Satori had pushed Asou away. He had to fix things.

When he got inside, he could see Asou at the end of the hall.

"Asou!" Satori yelled. He knew Asou could hear him, but Asou didn't turn around as he entered his apartment. And then the automatic lock clicked shut, separating them.

"Wait! Asou!"

Satori felt dizzy with worry. He had broken out into a cold sweat.

What does Asou think? What does he have the wrong idea about? Who was he thinking of when he'd said that Satori had someone else to talk to? Satori loved Asou so much. No one else, just Asou.

"Asou!"

He was about to run up to the door when the doorman's office door opened and a small, white-haired man emerged.

"Now, now; what's all the commotion?" He grabbed a hold of Satori's arm, making Satori gasp.

The doorman looked at Satori with wide eyes. "Why, you're Asou's friend..."

"I need to see Asou. I need to speak to him," Satori said quickly. He knew the doorman too well to throw him off.

The doorman followed Satori's gaze toward the door, but Asou had vanished.

Asou must have heard the doorman's voice through the door, but he still hadn't turned around. He hadn't stayed. Satori could only stand there in shock. What could be so bad that Asou would ignore him like this? What did Asou think happened?

"Did you have an argument?" the doorman asked kindly.

Satori nodded and bit his lip.

"It's hard to talk things out when you're both all hot under the collar. Maybe you should let things cool down first?" The doorman thumped Satori on the shoulder, and Satori hung his head.

He could yell as loud as he wanted, but there was no point if Asou wouldn't turn around. He'd just be a nuisance, not only to the doorman, but also to the other tenants. And Asou would be bothered by it, too. Maybe he should just retreat for now, like the doorman said.

But Satori couldn't go home like this, not when he didn't even understand what was going on. He didn't *want* to go home like this.

"I'm sure Asou will have cooled down by tomorrow. Then you'll be able to talk things out." The doorman thumped Satori comfortingly on the shoulder again.

Satori clenched his fists. He couldn't even bring himself to nod. His eyes burned, and his vision blurred with tears. Behind his tightly shut eyelids, he could see Asou's broad back. Satori realized

that it wasn't a side of Asou he'd seen often. Asou was always next to him or facing him. He rarely had his back to Satori.

Asou! he yelled silently. His heart throbbed. *Asou, I need to talk to you. I need to clear things up.*

If Satori could do that, then Asou would stop being so stubborn. He would go back to the way he always was. He would look at Satori, and listen to him, and smile. If only Satori could clear up this misunderstanding.

But he didn't even know what the misunderstanding was. He didn't know what was so bad that Asou wouldn't even answer him. What had caused it?

"You have someone else to talk to." Where had Asou gotten that idea from? Who did he think it was?

Satori didn't know.

Hey, Asou. I don't understand. Tell me! What are you thinking?

Satori bit his lip hard enough that his mouth flooded with the taste of copper.

Thanks to the clear blue sky, the campus still had a carefree holiday air to it. Tired out from their Golden Week festivities, the students were slower and lazier, even while they chatted about all the fun they'd had. Satori walked through the happy campus with heavy steps.

Last night, he had taken the doorman's advice and left the hallway, but he had stood outside of Asou's building all night. He had been discovered in the hedges in the early morning by the doorman, who had come out to clean the trash area.

The old man, his white hair sticking up every which way, had been shocked to discover Satori's haggard figure. Realizing that this wasn't quite normal, the man had offered to call Asou.

Satori had shaken his head frantically. "That's all right. It's nothing. I'll be going now." Satori had left as fast as he could without running.

Back at his own apartment, Satori took a shower and then managed to get a little sleep. He woke up in time to make his second class, but the agony in his chest was just as bad as ever. He felt as though he'd gone numb. However, his legs still ached from all the walking he'd done.

Still, he felt calmer than he had the night before. He could think straight again. When he thought back on what had happened, he could hear Asou saying "*You have other people to talk to.*" Asou had told Iizuka that he wanted to spend his life with Satori, and that Satori was the only one for him. So why would he say something like that? Who was he talking about? Satori had no more idea than he'd had last night.

He didn't know what Asou was confused about, but it was the reason Asou had pushed him away. Just thinking of the moment when Asou had shaken him off made Satori's heart twist. This must be what Asou felt when Satori had pushed him away. At the time, Satori had been too scared to think about what Asou was feeling. It hadn't even crossed his mind that he was being careless. Satori had hurt Asou, who hadn't done anything wrong. Satori had been so worried about Asou pushing him away, he hadn't thought about Asou's feelings at all.

Satori sighed as he made his way down the hall toward the classroom. There was still time before class started, so there weren't many people around. That meant he didn't have to worry about his depression showing on his face. He'd been thinking all morning about what Asou had said, but he was no closer to an answer.

Asou had never acted so stubbornly before. Satori must have done something to give Asou the wrong idea. Satori knew he had to apologize, though. Then they could talk, and he could do whatever he needed to set things straight.

But what in the world was Asou thinking?

Satori realized he was staring at his feet, so he lifted his head, trying to lift his spirits, as well. When he did so, he saw a tall, slender figure walking in front of him, and realized it was Yosuke Nakamoto. However, for once, Daichi Fujisaki wasn't with him. Come to think of it, Nakamoto and Fujisaki had been acting weird before Golden Week. They must have still been fighting.

"Nakamoto!" he called.

Nakamoto turned around. It looked like he'd had a good time during Golden Week. His face was softened somehow. Satori felt strangely let down. That expression could only mean that Nakamoto and Fujisaki had made up.

"Where's Fujisaki?" he asked, just to be sure.

Nakamoto's face lit up. "I haven't seen him yet today."

"That's unusual."

"Yeah..."

Nakamoto's sharp cheeks were stretched wide with a smile. It was an expression unlike any Satori had seen on him, and Satori was shocked by it. It looked like they had made up, but that wasn't reason enough for Nakamoto to be this happy. Something must have happened to him.

"You're being kind of creepy. Did something good happen?" Satori asked slyly.

Nakamoto nodded and refused to blush. "I guess."

"You look like something *really* good happened."

"Yeah?" Nakamoto murmured, suddenly turning serious. He fell silent.

Normally, Nakamoto sported more expressions than Asou did, but he was never emotional; he always kept his cool. For Nakamoto, this silence was a big thing.

Suddenly, Satori wondered if Nakamoto was in love. That would explain his sudden highs and lows. Since Satori had fallen in love with Asou, he had experienced them many times. Nakamoto would be happy if things were going well, but then he might start to worry they were going too well, just like Satori had.

"I wouldn't say it's perfect," Nakamoto said to himself.

"That's true." Satori nodded.

Sometimes love makes you worried or scared. And sometimes, that makes you hurt the person you care most about. Eventually, you don't know where to turn; you are full of contradictions; and then you get stuck.

"Where's Asou today?" Nakamoto asked.

Satori looked down automatically. "Dunno...he must not be here yet."

"Are you guys fighting?" Nakamoto asked.

Satori laughed bitterly. Nakamoto was too smart for his own good. "I wouldn't call it a fight, exactly, but...you're really sharp, Nakamoto."

"Not really. I just found out how dumb I really am." Nakamoto frowned a little.

Just then, Daichi Fujisaki's voice called, "Yosuke!"

They turned around to see Asou and Fujisaki walking toward them. For some reason, Fujisaki was grabbing onto Asou's shirt sleeve. Because Fujisaki was so much shorter than Asou, it looked like Fujisaki was dragging him along.

Satori's heart thumped in his chest. Asou wouldn't look at him last night and today, he was looking at the ground, still refusing to look. Satori was dying to know what Asou was thinking. He wanted to know so badly that he found himself staring at Asou. Asou walked over to where Satori and Nakamoto were standing, but he wouldn't look up.

"Morning, Okada," Fujisaki said cheerfully, smiling at Satori.

Satori couldn't tear his eyes off Asou. "Morning," he answered mechanically.

Fujisaki didn't seem to notice. "I went to Hokkaido for Golden Week. Asou's got your souvenir," he said carelessly.

"Thanks," Satori murmured, still staring at Asou.

Asou's eyes were set on the floor, and Satori was getting

frustrated. Asou was so close that Satori could touch him if he wanted. And the man wouldn't even look up. He wouldn't meet Satori's gaze.

Why, Asou?

"Daichi, I gotta go pick something up at the school store. Wanna come?" Nakamoto asked suddenly.

Fujisaki nodded. "Yeah, sure."

Out of the corner of his eye, Satori saw Nakamoto take hold of Fujisaki's arm and the two walked off together. Nakamoto had decided that Satori and Asou couldn't patch things up with the two of them around. Fujisaki must have realized they'd been fighting, too. In fact, it must be why he had dragged Asou over.

"I'm sorry about yesterday..." Asou whispered after Nakamoto and Fujisaki had gone. Then he turned around and began to walk off.

Without thinking, Satori grabbed Asou's arm. "Wait!" he called in a husky voice.

For a moment, he thought that Asou would shake him off the way he had the night before, but Asou just stood there. He didn't turn around, but kept his back to Satori. Satori's heart throbbed.

Turn around. Look at me. Let me see your face.

Satori wanted to scream, but he forced himself to stay quiet. He couldn't let himself get overly emotional right now. He needed to apologize and figure out what this whole misunderstanding was about.

He sucked in a breath; his throat had gone dry. "Wait, Asou. Listen to what I have to say." Satori spoke slowly, even though he could hear his own voice shake. "Asou, you don't need to apologize. I'm the one who should be apologizing. I'm sorry." It was as much as he could get out.

He could feel Asou frown. "Why are you apologizing? I'm the one who needs to apologize," Asou continued before Satori could disagree.

"Iizuka and I...talked things out afterward. I told him I'm

not going to fool around anymore. He seemed to understand, so he won't bother us again."

Now it was Satori's turn to interrupt. "I know."

Asou gasped in surprise. "You know?"

"I know that. I heard it from Iizuka last night," Satori said, and then he let go of Asou's arm. Asou didn't run away. He turned, as if he was preparing himself for the worst. He kept his head down and didn't look up at Satori. His hair—which always felt so much softer than it looked—fell over his handsome face, hiding his expression.

Satori wanted to look at Asou while he talked. He wanted to face Asou. Why wouldn't Asou look at him?

"Asou," Satori said, pushing back his growing frustration. Asou gave a violent start. "Who were you talking about last night, when you said I had someone else to talk to?"

"I..." Asou trailed off.

Silence fell. Other than the faint hustle and bustle around them, the only sound was their breathing.

"I went to your place as soon as Iizuka and I were done talking," Asou said in a low voice, still looking at the floor. "You were talking and laughing with a guy on a bike and I heard him call you by your first name..."

"Oh," Satori said softly. So Asou had seen him talking with his brother and thought they were close.

But why would he think that? They'd only been talking.

"Since Iizuka showed up, you haven't wanted me to touch you...since I was wild in high school. You have every right not to respect me anymore," Asou said resolutely. "I'm not good enough for you. I thought you might have realized that and were trying to distance yourself from me. And then I saw that guy on the bike...I couldn't go over and talk to you. I turned off my cell phone because I thought you might call to break up with me. And if I went home, you might show up to do it..." Asou stopped suddenly, gulping.

Satori could only stare at Asou with wide eyes.

"When you came to the apartment yesterday, I was going to

ask who the guy on the bike was. But...I couldn't handle hearing you talk about some other guy. I could deal with you telling me you hated me, but not that...that's why I couldn't listen to what you had to say. I was too afraid."

"Asou."

"I'm sorry," Asou said in a strangled voice, turning away again.

"Wait!" Satori grabbed Asou's arm frantically, before Asou could run away. The bag he'd been holding fell to the floor, but he couldn't bother to pick it up. "Wait, Asou! Listen to me!"

"I don't want to hear it!"

"Asou!"

Asou tried to shake him off, but Satori held on tightly. He couldn't let Asou get away. He needed to explain. "Asou, you've got the wrong idea! That was my brother!" Satori cried, gripping Asou's arm.

"What?" Asou gasped.

Satori felt his arm relax, but he kept holding on, not satisfied that Asou wouldn't run. "That was my brother! I swear. My brother, Natsuki Okada!"

Asou turned around slowly. Their eyes met.

He looks like he's about to cry, Satori thought.

The expression on that handsome face was so agonized, as if Asou would start to cry at any moment. Satori couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"I love you!" Satori cried, throwing himself into Asou's arms. He heard the sound of a backpack and a paper bag hitting the floor as Asou caught him.

"Satori..." Asou said, dazed.

"I love you!" Satori repeated. "I love you!"

Satori pressed his forehead to Asou's shoulder, and Asou's arms went around him slowly and carefully, as if he were made of glass. Satori could feel the warmth of Asou's arms on his back. But the gentleness and the softness only frustrated him. He didn't care where they were. He didn't care who was watching. All he wanted

right now was for Asou to hold him tightly.

"Harder. Harder," he said, clinging to Asou.

Without warning, Asou's arms tightened around Satori, hugging him close, almost roughly. "Satori!" Asou's voice was husky in his ear.

Satori was flooded with everything he'd grown so used to in the past three months—the feel of Asou's body, his warmth, his scent. Asou was holding him so tightly that it hurt, but Satori didn't mind at all. He felt so happy, he could've cried. Then relief overwhelmed him as a sweet numbness enveloped him. His lips began to move of their own accord.

"I could never hate you, Asou. I love you. I love you so much it scared me. You told me it was all in the past, but I was still jealous...I felt so horrible...I started thinking about what I'd do if I felt like that every single time I learned something new about you...about what I would do if someone came along and took you from me...I got so scared. I was scared of myself, of how much I love you, of how I couldn't think about anyone but you."

"Satori."

"I'm different than you—I've lived in a very small world, so I'm narrow-minded, and I'm a coward...it made me so happy when you told me you wanted to be with me forever...but I didn't have the confidence to be with you...I'm not talented, I don't have any great qualities, I'm jealous and possessive, and I'm not good enough for you. So I was scared. I was worried because I didn't know how serious you were." Satori felt choked up with emotion. He was crying now, hiccupping like a child, but he couldn't stop. "But I still love you. I'm scared, and I'm worried about everything, but I love you. I don't care if I get hurt. I don't care what happens. I just want to be with you. I don't want to lose you!"

Still holding Satori, Asou opened the door of the closest classroom, and led Satori inside. The door shut with a bang. The classroom, which usually housed linguistics seminars, was empty. Satori had his face buried in Asou's shoulder, and he couldn't be

bothered to look up.

"It was my brother that you saw yesterday. Just ask Yasumi-san, and she'll tell you. My brother and his wife had a fight, and he got really pissed off. He came to me to apologize about some stuff in our past. That's all. Oh, and...Iizuka kissed me, but he didn't do anything else. But it still scared me...and I even got scared when *you* touched me. That's why I shook you off. It wasn't because I hated you!"

Satori didn't even know what he was saying anymore, but he could feel Asou jerk in surprise.

"What? *What* did Iizuka do to you?" Asou pulled away slowly, but Satori clutched at him, shaking his head. He didn't want Asou to move away.

"H-he just kissed me."

"Just? When?"

"The day we went to see that movie."

"That movie...that was the day we saw him..." Asou said, pure venom in the word "him." Then, he hugged Satori close again. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Satori."

"What? Why are you apologizing? Do you hate me now? Do you hate me because I'm so jealous and so afraid of everything?" Satori hiccupped.

He felt something soft on his eyelids. Asou was kissing away his tears.

"Of course I don't. I *love* you. Only you."

The soft lips moved from his eyelids to his lips. Satori could taste the salt of his own tears. His lip stung where he'd bit it the night before, but the joy that welled up in his heart was sweet.

"I'm the one who's always scared and jealous," Asou said. "When I thought you might hate me, I was paralyzed. I couldn't even move. All I could think about was what I would do if you told me you'd fallen in love with someone else. I was scared to hear what you had to say. Just hearing another man call you 'Satori' made me so angry. I got so pissed seeing someone act all cozy with *my* Satori.

I wanted to punch him in the face, but I was too scared to even ask you who he was.”

Scared. Satori opened his eyes to see Asou’s handsome face. He was gazing at Satori with a serious expression.

“I shouldn’t have been scared. I’m so sorry for worrying you, Satori.”

Satori was in a daze. Asou had been just as worried as he had. Asou had been scared *because* he knew how Satori felt. After all, this was their first love. It was their love for one another and their fear of losing each other that had turned them into cowards.

It wasn’t just me, Satori thought, relaxing. The thought sent a ticklish shyness and a deep sense of happiness through him. Asou was standing there, his dark eyes full of passion—and also worry over why Satori hadn’t said anything yet. Satori felt a rush of love for Asou. He wrapped his arms around Asou’s neck, pulling him closer. He could see tears brimming in Asou’s eyes.

“Asou,” Satori said, lifting Asou’s head. Just like Asou had done earlier, he pressed his lips to Asou’s eyelids and kissed away Asou’s tears.

“Satori,” Asou said shakily.

“Let’s go home,” Satori whispered. He kissed Asou’s lips, biting them softly. It was the first time he’d ever kissed Asou. It was the first time he’d made the initial move. “Let’s go home and make out,” he said, drawing back.

Asou gave him a watery smile. The expression on his handsome face couldn’t be called cool, but somehow, it was very charming.

“Can’t we do that now?”

“Just one more kiss, then. We’ll save the rest for when we get home,” Satori answered with a smile, just before Asou kissed him.

The second the heavy door closed behind them, Asou took Satori into his arms. He grabbed Satori’s chin and kissed him forcefully. He seemed to have no use for gentle kisses, pushing his tongue deep into Satori’s mouth.

“Oh, mmm...” Satori wrapped his arms around Asou’s neck, giving in. He moved closer, slipping his tongue into Asou’s mouth and deepening the kiss.

After their first kiss in a week, they had headed to Asou’s apartment. Both Satori and Asou made the entire trip in silence. They could both feel just how much they wanted each other. That feeling was more eloquent than any words they could have said. They had made love many times before, but it had never been quite like this.

“Ah...” Satori tried to steal a breath through the tiny space between their lips, but Asou crushed their mouths together a second later. The kiss was harder than Satori had expected, and he moaned softly.

Asou kissed him breathless, and Satori felt a rush of love. These kisses didn’t feel like they were meant to get him hot. Satori felt like Asou was trying to show Satori all his love through these kisses. He was getting drunk on them.

More, deeper, harder.

Asou kissed like he was trying to steal everything from Satori. Satori wanted to keep kissing. He wanted Asou.

“Mmm...”

Satori opened his eyes ever so slightly as his back hit the wall with a *thud*. His vision was blurred, so he saw Asou’s almond-colored eyes as if through a mist. Asou must have felt Satori’s eyes on him, because he opened his eyes without breaking the kiss. They were too close for Satori to read Asou’s expression. But he could see clearly that those dark eyes were filled with a stormy passion.

Asou knows I want him. He knows and that’s why he’s kissing me, Satori thought with what was left of his brain. The thought got him even hotter than before.

Sensing that, Asou's tongue delved deeper inside Satori's mouth. The passionate kisses were even more pleasurable now that they were gazing at each other. Satori could feel himself trembling. He worried his knees would give out, but Asou pressed him up against the wall, holding him. He ripped Satori's shirt open, roughly caressing his smooth, heated skin.

"Mm...mm..."

Asou kissed him as if he was trying to devour the moans that escaped Satori's lips. It wasn't until Satori saw stars behind his closed eyelids that Asou finally released him.

"Ah...ah..." Satori gasped sweetly, and then he felt Asou bite his neck and it stung. The pain made Satori frown, but he didn't let go. Instead, he guided Asou's rough hands down between his legs, unsatisfied that Asou was only caressing his upper body. Asou wanted him just as much as he wanted Asou. The thought made him so hard.

"Satori!" Asou said passionately, pushing him down to the ground, where the foyer of Asou's apartment was large enough for them to spread out.

The floor hurt his back, but Satori was past suggesting that they take things into the bedroom. His whole body was reacting to Asou's rough, sensual caresses. What excited him even more was Asou's low voice, calling his name and saying, "I love you," over and over again. The pleasure that flooded him was so sharp that it was almost painful, and Satori felt the last shreds of his sanity disappear. He wanted Asou right now. He wanted to feel Asou's hot skin on his. He wanted to take everything Asou could give him. He clung to Asou as these emotions welled up.

"Satori! Satori!"

He heard Asou say his name urgently, felt Asou's body heat.

"Oh!" He gasped. The next moment, Satori cried out as he felt Asou thrust against him, hard. He dug his nails into Asou's back, unable to take the fierce movement. "Ah! That hurts!"

Usually, Asou would wait, caressing Satori gently until he



calmed down. But now he couldn't wait; this time, he did all he could to fan the flames of Satori's arousal. He caressed Satori even more passionately than before, rubbing him, grinding their hips together to drive Satori crazy with pleasure. Satori could only submit to it, compelled by an invisible force.

"Mm...ah!" Satori arched his back as the pain evaporated into pleasure. He couldn't stop his body from moving; he wanted Asou so badly. His cries of pain grew more and more aroused, changing to moans of pleasure. Satori's body melted under Asou's touch. They were a tangle of limbs; he couldn't tell where his body ended and Asou's began. His mind was blank and he couldn't think. The one thing he knew was that the arms holding him belonged to Asou. That was all. But it was more than enough.

"Asou! Asou!"

"Satori..."

Satori cried out again as he felt heat explode inside him. *Asou made me come just from this*, he thought, right before he blacked out.

"Satori? Satori?" Asou called softly.

Satori opened his eyes slowly, taking in Asou's bedroom.

"You okay?" Asou was gazing at him with a frown. He looked worried for Satori, but also like a child about to be punished.

Satori couldn't help smiling. "I'm okay," he answered. He felt himself blush at how husky his voice sounded.

The sweat on his body had dried, and Asou had cleaned him. His clothes were gone, and he was wrapped in a clean bathrobe. The dry sheets felt good against his cheek.

After they'd made love on the floor in the foyer, Asou had picked up Satori's limp body and carried him to the bedroom. There, Asou had made love to him over and over again. And Satori had

begged him to keep going, over and over, to make up for the week without touching.

Asou's love making had been rougher and more impatient than ever, but Satori hadn't minded at all. He'd been happy to make Asou lose control that way.

"I brought some water. Do you want any?"

Satori nodded. "Yeah, thanks." A sharp pain shot through his thighs as he tried to move his heavy body. "Ooh..." He froze, falling back onto the bed.

"Satori!" Asou peered at him anxiously.

Satori grinned ruefully at him. "I guess I'm not one-hundred percent okay."

"Sorry. I guess I got a little carried away..." Asou was pale with worry, and Satori couldn't help laughing.

Asou sure is emotional, he thought. Then he realized that Asou never showed his emotions to anyone else. It was only when he was with Satori that he let his guard down.

Satori was thinking this over and feeling very satisfied with himself, when Asou propped a pillow up against the headboard, and said, "Here. You should be able to sit up more comfortably now."

Asou put out a hand, and then he used his arms to support Satori's movements. He laid Satori back on the cushion carefully, as if Satori were made of glass. It still hurt, but it wasn't unbearable.

"You okay?"

"I'm okay. Thanks." Satori nodded, and Asou gave him a relieved smile. He held out the glass from the bedside table, and sat down next to Satori.

"Thanks." Satori took a sip, and the cold water soaked into his heated body. He felt Asou's eyes on him, and he looked up.

"I really am sorry. I couldn't stop myself." The hesitation in Asou's voice was adorable. This was something Satori had never felt while he'd been in love with Asou. There were dozens of people who knew how cool and handsome Asou was, but Satori was the only one who knew how adorable and dorky Asou could be.

"Don't worry. I'm fine. I was the one who asked you to, and it's not like I could have stopped, either," Satori said, returning the glass to the bedside table, before leaning against Asou.

Asou put his arm around Satori's shoulder, hesitantly at first, and then he pulled Satori in close. The combined heat from their bodies created an indescribable warmth. Satori felt peaceful, but it was a different kind of peace than what he'd felt when they were making love. He sighed contentedly.

"My parents never got along," Asou said suddenly, and Satori looked up. Asou was looking down at him; his mouth twisted slightly. "Because of my mom's affairs. My mom was a free spirit, and my dad, who was very conservative, could never take that well. He tried to tie my mother down at home. So my mom wanted a divorce, but my father refused. I don't know if it was because he loved her, or just because of his pride. The one thing I do know is that neither my mom nor my dad thought about *me* at all."

Asou stopped and gave a little sigh. "My mom didn't think of anyone but herself and her lovers, and my dad was always thinking about my mother. So, my mom was just a woman, and my father was just a man. They never listened to what I had to say. They'd take care of me if they felt like it, but if not, they'd ignore me. They gave me money so I never starved, but now, I think that's just another form of child abuse. My grandfather understood all that, and he looked after me, but he passed away when I was eight... and after that, I might as well have been living alone. I don't know what would have happened to me if my uncle hadn't checked on me from time to time."

Asou's voice was calm; Satori just listened quietly. *So this is what Iizuka meant when he'd said that Asou's parents had abandoned him.*

"I didn't have any brothers or sisters, so I was really lonely. I just wanted someone to care about me. I didn't care who." Asou's voice dipped low, and the self-deprecation and pain Satori could hear in his lover's strained tone made his heart ache. "When people came

on to me, I was happy because it made me feel like they needed me. I felt like it made me belong. But gradually, I realized that it was just an illusion. That they just wanted my body, not my heart. I realized that the people who would jump into bed with me only cared about how I looked. I was just a kid, and I was an idiot. If I'd just stopped to think, I would have understood right away."

Satori squeezed Asou's hand, heartbroken for his lover.

Asou looked at Satori with wide eyes for a moment, and then continued: "By the time I got into high school, I had a really dry, cruel attitude about the people who came on to me. Watching my parents had made me scared of love. I think deep down, I didn't trust it. That's why I decided that I'd never love anyone—that I just wanted sex. I treated people badly; I was really horrible."

Satori remembered how Asou had been with Iizuka. His stony expression; his cold tone. "At the time, Iizuka's parents were going through a really bad divorce. I never cared about him, but he felt differently, I guess." Asou stopped and gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I can't use my parents as an excuse, though. There are hundreds of people in the same situation who don't act the way I did. I was weak. I don't blame you if you look down on me for it."

"Asou," Satori said, hugging him tightly. He didn't want to hear Asou belittling himself. Satori's parents had always gotten along, and he hadn't lost his grandfather at such a young age, so he had no idea how Asou had felt. But he knew that Asou had always done the best he could with what he had.

Everyone had their own issues. Everyone was weak. Satori could never compare his own worries with Asou's, and there wasn't any reason to try. But they'd both worried in their own way about their problems and suffered through their own issues. It was hard to face things head-on and get through them.

But people can change.

"Why didn't you tell me all that when Iizuka first showed up?" Satori asked.

Asou's mouth twisted scornfully. "It feels like I'm making

excuses, you know? Besides, I wasn't sure if you'd look down on me once you knew. I was too scared to tell you. No matter how I feel, the truth is that I used to sleep around," Asou said in a bitter tone; then, as if it had just occurred to him, he asked, "Speaking of which, you said that you talked to Iizuka yesterday. Did he go see you?"

Satori shook his head. "I ran into him at Escualo when I was looking for you."

"Escualo? You went there to look for me? By yourself?" Asou's eyes were wide.

Satori couldn't help laughing. "You weren't picking up your phone. I had to do something. I went to some clubs, too. Everyone said they hadn't seen you in years."

"Satori..." Asou buried his face in Satori's hair. He sighed and rubbed Satori's shoulders lovingly. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I told you—you don't need to apologize. I'm the one who needed to apologize," Satori whispered, wrapping his arms around Asou, hugging him tightly.

The body in his arms was much stronger than his own, but Satori felt as though he was holding a little boy. He felt a rush of love. "Hey, Asou."

"Yeah?" came the relaxed answer.

"You won't be lonely anymore. I'll be with you. So it's going to be okay," he said softly, hugging his lover tightly.

Asou kissed him softly.

"Satori," Asou said thoughtfully. "I'm glad I fell in love with you."

"You really piss me off. Just how much trouble do you need to get into?" Yasumi said, her face a picture of irritation. She was wearing the same kind of casual clothing she'd had on three days

earlier: jeans, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap.

Next to her stood Asou, looking uncomfortable; beside him stood Satori. They were in the lobby of the Kansai Airport. Yasumi was going back to the U.S. again.

"You were so happy to find out Satori loved you. You decided he was the only one for you...you even proposed to him! You came on so strong, and then you almost gave up just because you decided he's acting weird? If you'd just talked to him and asked him what was wrong, you wouldn't have had to go through all of that." Yasumi finished her rant and heaved a sigh. "I feel like Satori only sees me when I'm pissed off. Sorry, Satori. I'm not really this violent. I'm actually a very sweet girl. Remember that."

"Liar," Asou whispered.

Yasumi glared at him. "What was that?"

"Hey, hey," Satori broke in, laughing. "I was partly to blame for what happened."

Yasumi pushed through Asou to link her arm through Satori's. "You're too nice, Satori. But don't baby him too much. If you give Naotaka an inch, he'll take a mile."

"Hey, don't say crap like that to Satori! And how many times do I have to tell you not to touch him!" Asou said peevishly, wrenching Satori's arm out of Yasumi's grasp. He held Satori's hand tightly. "Satori belongs to me."

Satori blushed, but he didn't take his hand away. He loved this side of Asou, too. So much so that Satori had stopped caring about who was watching.

Ever since that day, I've been completely head over heels for Asou.

Since the day they made love at Asou's apartment and Asou told Satori about his past, Satori had begun to think that Asou was adorable no matter what he did. The emotions Satori felt now were sweeter, more passionate, and surer than ever before.

It wasn't that his worries had completely disappeared, but it was easier for Satori to accept those negative feelings now that he

knew Asou worried just like he did. So long as he was in love with Asou, he'd feel uneasy from time to time. But it was only a problem if he kept those feelings to himself. If he got scared, all he had to do was talk to Asou and tell him so. Then the two of them could resolve things together. That's what Satori believed now.

Yasumi, who had been watching the two of them, said with a mischievous smile: "Naotaka, make sure you keep holding Satori like that from now on."

"I don't need you to tell me that." Asou entwined his fingers with Satori's.

Satori couldn't help smiling at the feel of those long, thick fingers.

"I'm glad to hear it. I'll see you two later," Yasumi said briskly and turned away sharply.

"Yasumi-san!" Satori called. Yasumi turned around to look at him.

"Thanks for everything." He bowed. After all, it was partly thanks to Yasumi that he and Asou were together.

Yasumi tipped her hat like the hero in a spaghetti Western. Satori saw a flash of her white teeth as he watched her walk away.

"She's so cool..." Satori said.

He felt Asou sigh beside him. "She always steals my thunder. She's like some masked crusader who only shows up when the heroine is in trouble. She makes me look like a complete dumbass."

"Hmm..."

Satori nodded and looked up at Asou. There was a wry smile on his perfect face. Everyone wanted a hero. But heroes rarely stayed by your side. Satori would rather have someone who really cared about him, no matter how awkward or uncool or weak they might be sometimes.

"But I love that side of you, Asou," he said, without realizing he was speaking out loud.

Asou looked down at him in surprise. When their eyes met,

Satori felt himself flush from the bottom of his neck to the tips of his ears. Even after everything that had happened, he was really embarrassed, especially for saying he loved Asou so casually.

"Um, I mean, like, you know...unlike Yasumi...uh, even when you're a dork, you're still really cool, and uh, I really like that...uh..."

"Satori." Asou chuckled. He stooped down and kissed Satori hard.

"Mm...Asou!"

"That was just so cute." Asou laughed, undaunted, and squeezed Satori's hand. Satori could feel Asou's sincerity through those fingers, and he smiled as warmth flooded his heart. This was what made Asou cool.

"I really wish we could just skip," Asou said as they started walking.

"Not today. We've been skipping way too much. I know Nakamoto and Fujisaki said they'd take notes for us, but we can't keep doing this."

"I guess," Asou agreed. "Besides, I'm not even sure if those two are actually going to class..." Asou muttered.

Satori stared. "What? They're skipping, too?"

"Well no, but you know, they have things going on, too..." Asou smiled sweetly.

Satori shook his head, confused. He hadn't seen either Fujisaki or Nakamoto since they'd met in the hall that day. But he didn't think it was anything to worry about, because they seemed to have made up.

"Well, I guess we've got no choice. Let's go to class today."

Asou heaved a sigh, and Satori nodded at him seriously.

"Not just today. I'm going to study really hard from now on. And I have my part-time job too," Satori said seriously.

Asou frowned a little. "I know you're a good student, but what's with the sudden fervor?"

"For after graduation. I haven't decided yet what kind of job

I want, but no matter what, if we're going to be together, I need to speak English."

This whole incident had taught Satori that no matter how much he worried, in the end, there was only one answer; he was in love with Asou. He couldn't imagine being with anyone but Asou. And that's why he'd made his decision.

"So let's just do what we can now. That's what—" *I've decided*, he meant to say, but Asou hugged him so tightly that Satori fell into his arms. "Hey, Asou, what—?"

"I'm so happy. Thank you, Satori," Asou whispered in a husky voice.

Satori could sense the strength and earnestness in the arms around him, and he felt a rush of joy as he wrapped his arms around Asou.

"I'm happy, too, Asou."

Even if he got scared again, all they had to do was hold each other like this. Just so long as they got everything out in the open, without hiding how they really felt, and then held onto each other this way, they'd only become stronger.

They could get through anything together.

THE END

Afterword

I hope you enjoyed the book. Personally, *Fevered Kiss* left a big impression on me. I'm so glad I was able to get it published. What left such an impression? One certain thing:

How many kissing scenes it has!

Before I wrote *Fevered Kiss*, I had a really hard time with love scenes of any kind, including kissing scenes. Just writing a little kissing scene was a huge deal for me. If I had to write an actual love scene, I freaked out, and usually couldn't finish the story.

So whenever my editor, Maeda-san, would ask me to put in more love scenes, I would laugh and try to change the subject. Like a vampire shying away from the light, I tried to avoid the love scenes.

But one day, I realized that I couldn't keep going on like that—not if I was a Boy's Love writer! After all, what would Boy's Love be without *love*? Just like *okonomiyaki* isn't *okonomiyaki* without the cabbage! So I decided to write a story full of love scenes!

And that's how *Fevered Kiss* was born.

After all, kissing is an important part of love scenes! I even put the word "kiss" in the title! No one could stop me! I needed to write about kissing! Kissing, kissing, tons of kissing! Yahoo!

And so I started writing, and finally, I could write kissing scenes without making a fuss. But I still had trouble with the sex scenes, so I made sure to write a lot of those in the story "*Hold Me Tighter*." And now, I can write sex scenes just fine, too.

So, that's how this book came about. I hope you all liked it.

Come to think of it, this is also my first novel where both protagonists were in college. I tried to remember my own college days for inspiration, but I went to class in jeans and a t-shirt, and I

snored through all my classes. There's nothing inspirational about that. My memories were of no use, so I just laughed to myself.

(But girls shouldn't snore. That's no good. Wait, Kuga, that's not the only point to make fun of!)

Anyway, we've reached the end here. My thanks to everyone who worked on this, including my editor, Maeda-san, who always puts up with me. I'm sorry I always get nervous and talk so fast when we have meetings.

Much gratitude must go to Taishi Zaou, who drew the illustrations. Thanks so much for taking the job even though you're so busy. The pictures are so lovely and erotic.

Thanks to all my family for putting up with me, too.

And lastly, thanks to everyone who read this book. I can't thank you all enough. I'm going to work my hardest to keep on writing books for you to enjoy.

If any of you have read the Afterword before the actual story, I hope my weirdness didn't turn you off. There's no strange asides in which the author yells at herself in the actual story.

Stay well!

—Ari Kuga



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四コマ劇場

by TAISHI ZAOU